

Damian's Oracle *(revised)*
War of Gods, Book I

By Lizzy Ford
<http://www.guerrillawordfare.com/>

Edited by Christine LePorte
<http://www.christineleporte.com/>

Cover art and design by Dafeenah
<http://www.indiedesignz.com/>

* * * * *

Special feature at the conclusion: excerpt from
Damian's Assassin
Book II in the War of Gods series

* * * * *

Damian's Oracle (revised) copyright October 2011 by Lizzy Ford
Smashwords Edition

Cover art and design copyright 2011 by Dafeenah

* * * * *

Smashwords edition license notes:

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to Smashwords.com to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

* * * * *

See other titles by Lizzy Ford at
<http://www.GuerrillaWordfare.com>

You can follow the GW team on Twitter:

@LizzyFord2010
@cleporte
@dafeenajameel

Twitter hashtags:

#guerrillawriter, #fantasy, #romance, #paranormalromance

* * * * *

CHAPTER ONE

Sofia dropped her purse on the desk in her cube without removing her sunglasses. The early December sun couldn't set fast enough to prevent her pounding headache from growing worse on her drive to work. To ease her exposure to the sun, she'd volunteered for the evening shift to support the West Coast customers. Unfortunately, the commute to work every day was still excruciating.

"So ... did the doc say you're turning into a vampire?" Jake, her ex-boyfriend from college and current coworker, appeared in the doorway of her cube as soon as she sat down. She ignored the hunk, hoping he'd take the hint. "I brought you something. You can pretend it's blood." He held out a bottle of red water.

"You have five minutes to leave my cube, or I'll bite *your* neck!" she retorted.

"Really, what'd the doc say?" Jake grew serious and sat in the spare chair in her cube.

Sofia rubbed her temples. She was better off pulling a random diagnosis out of a hat.

"No brain tumors," she replied. "Probably not the neurological issue they thought. They're looking at other ideas."

"Do they know what makes you allergic to light and eat raw steaks covered in peanut butter for every meal?"

"They're not raw, and I only eat them for dinner."

"Did the doc explain your mood swings, too?"

She gritted her teeth. She'd known Jake since her junior year of college. They dated in college, parted ways mutually, and ended up working for the same financial planning firm in Virginia. Normally, she felt privileged that he still gave her the time of day, what with the way he'd turned out-- formed like a Greek god with hazel eyes so pretty their boss swooned every time she spoke to him. But today, she didn't want to be reminded that she'd changed from a normal human being into a sunlight intolerant, moody bitch in the two months since her twenty-fourth birthday.

"Think you can talk the boss into letting me come in an hour or two later?" she asked.

"Yeah, easy. I just smile pretty. Doesn't work on you, but it does on her."

"Thanks, Jake. The headaches are getting worse."

"Sofi, I'm worried," he said, softening. "What's going on?"

"The doctors don't know," she said with a sigh. "They're flying in a specialist from overseas. They said it might be some sort of rare blood disorder."

"What the hell does that mean? That they really don't have a clue?"

"Pretty much."

"I Googled your symptoms," Jake said and unfolded a piece of paper. "A lot of bullshit posted by wannabe vampires and *Twilight* fans. But I found this, too."

He waved the page in front of her.

"This is fruit punch, by the way," he said, nudging the bottle of red water toward her. "Your favorite, right?"

"I don't remember telling you that."

"Anyway, among the wacko postings, I found this site." He pointed on the page to reveal a link to a website with a single name and phone number written on it.

Damian Bylun.

"What is this?" she asked, taking the paper from him.

Jake wiped his mouth the way he did when he'd admitted to cheating on her four years ago. She lifted her sunglasses to squint at him.

"It's a blog this doctor guy keeps. In it, he describes what you're going through."

"For real?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"How did you find it? I spent days surfing the net. Even Tanya tried to help."

"Aw well, you and your best friend just aren't as good as The Jake. She's still a bitch, by the way," Jake said.

Sofia rolled her eyes. He'd never gotten over her friend refusing to date him after she dumped him. Jake's ego was as large as his size sixteen feet.

"What does he say my symptoms are from?"

"I don't know. His blog is firewalled from here, though, so you should just call him."

Damian Bylun. It struck a chord deep within her, as if she should know it. Struck by something else, she removed her sunglasses and eyed Jake, saying,

"You know, you haven't spoken to me more than to say hello in two years. I haven't been able to get you out of my cube for the past two weeks. What's up with that, Jake?"

"I've been doing a lot of soul searching and am just trying to ... be a better person," he said with a nervous chuckle and rubbed his mouth again.

She could almost see him standing before his mirror practicing the line before going to the bars to pick up chicks. But whatever he was hiding couldn't be that important.

"I'll look at this later," she said. "Go forth and leave me be, The Jake. Leave the punch."

"Sofia, I really think you should call this guy," he said, looking her in the eye. "Please."

A sense of uneasiness ran through her at the gravity in his normally light tone.

"Fine, I will."

He flashed a smile and strode from her cube. Sofia looked at the paper again. She retrieved her cell and tucked the paper into her pocket. Snatching her sunglasses, she almost made it to the door before she heard Lacy's voice.

"Sofia, can you come see me?"

She grimaced and turned to see the tall blond striding toward her office. Lacy wore a skirt too short and tight for office wear, but when you're the boss ...

"I noticed you've been taking a lot of sick time lately," Lacy said as Sofia entered the room.

"Yeah, I'm having some issues," Sofia replied.

"Jake told me. HR passed it to upper management. I need you to bring in some sort of paperwork from your doctor stating what's wrong."

"They don't know what's wrong. I can bring you another one of the notes verifying that's where I am when I'm missing work."

"What do you mean? They're doctors," Lacy said, looking up from the memo in her hands. "Of course they know what's wrong. And those notes aren't good enough."

"They really don't know," Sofia said again.

"I can't make reasonable accommodations for you if I don't know what's wrong."

"That makes no sense, Lacy. If I have a doctor's note saying I'm under their care, isn't that good enough until they figure it out?"

Lacy arched a delicate eyebrow.

"No, it's not," she snapped. "I need a diagnosis, and I need a treatment plan."

"A *what*?"

"You deaf now, too?"

Sofia bit her tongue. She lacked Jake's golden tongue, and her bluntness had gotten her in trouble more than once. Normally she acquiesced in favor of a paycheck, but Lacy's demand was bizarre, even by Lacy-standards.

"Look, Lacy, I'm not trying to be difficult. I'm so frustrated right now. I just came back from a battery of tests that said nothing's wrong with me." The moment the words left her mouth, she knew her mistake. Lacy's eyebrows shot up.

"What do you mean there's nothing wrong? Are you making this up?" her boss demanded.

"No, Lacy, what I meant is that whatever is wrong-- "

"So you're a basket case. One of those aphrodisiacs or something."

"Hypochondriac, not aphro-- "

"I meant, you're making it up!" Lacy snarled. "Aphro, hypo, who gives a damn. They're the same thing! You've been lying to me!"

"No, Lacy-- "

"You've been lying to Jake, too. He's been worried sick! Oh my God, what-- "

"Lacy, stop!" Sofia snapped, standing. "I haven't lied to you. They don't know what's wrong, and I'm not making it up!"

"You've always thought yourself soooo much better than the rest of us, and I'm sick of your attitude. Now you're lying to me about being sick. You know what? Until you can prove you've got some damn disease, you're on leave without pay."

Stunned, Sofia stared at her.

"Lacy, I'm-- "

"Shut up and get the fuck out!"

Surprise, then fury, lit her insides.

"Fine," she said, wrenching the office door open. "But Lacy, everyone knows you're screwing Jake."

Lacy's mouth dropped open. Dimly, Sofia knew she'd never work there again after that low blow. She snatched her bag and hurried home, not reflecting on her behavior until she tossed her coat on the bed.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Her cell rang. She dug it out of her pocket.

"Hey, Tanya," she said, kicking off her shoes. "What's up?"

"Hey, hon, Jake told me you quit work?"

"Jake?" she echoed.

"He's still a dick. You're not seeing him again, are you?"

"Tanya, I have a headache. I'll call you later."

Sofia hung up, frustrated. She emptied her pockets and tossed her lunch in the fridge. When she retreated to the bathroom, she flipped on the light, cringed, but forced herself to stare at her reflection in the mirror over the sink.

She was going to die. She just knew it. Whatever her disease, it had eluded the doctors for months. By the time they found out what it was, she'd probably be near dead, like stage four cancer. She stared at her reflection, caught by something else that didn't seem right. She leaned forward, staring at her irises. Her favorite feature, her eyes, had always been a pretty shade of turquoise. But instead of a rim of darker blue surrounding her irises, they were rimmed by a thick band of iridescent silver.

"Oh my God," she whispered. As she stared, the silver seemed to flare into a deep glow and swirl around her irises like cars around a racetrack. She closed her eyes and opened them again. The silver was still there. "Hallucinations!"

She ran to her desk and pulled out a journal, jotting down her latest symptom.

Sensitivity to light, enhanced hearing so I can't sleep without noise cancellation headphones, aversion to fish, crave meat and broccoli, nails growing faster, HEADACHES, HEADACHES, HEADACHES, stuffy nose, addiction to peanut butter, weight loss, general weakness ...

The strange symptoms went on for three pages. She read the list until panic stirred in her breast. Claustrophobic in the dark cave that had become her home, she grabbed her coat and purse and set out into the cold, brisk evening. She didn't want to die, and she didn't want to spend the rest of her life without ever seeing the sun again like Brad Pitt in *Interview with the Vampire*.

She joined crowds of people milling through downtown Crystal City to see the Christmas displays and shop. The sight of such normalcy calmed her, until someone brushed against her.

A man's face, a woman in the hospital on her death bed, their children surrounding them.

"I'm so sorry!" someone said, steadying her as she staggered under the impact of the sudden image. Her vision cleared, and she looked into the face of the man from her vision, though he was much younger standing before her.

"I'm okay," she said, forcing a smile. "Thanks."

He continued on his way, holding out his hand to the woman awaiting him. The same woman who would die in twenty-three years from ovarian cancer.

More hallucinations. Nothing more, she told herself. Sofia shrugged the sense of foreboding away and stuffed her hands into her pockets. Her fingers brushed the folded paper Jake had given her. She pulled it free, once again compelled to stare at the name written there. She made her way to a coffee shop and sat at a table in the darker end of the shop, hot cocoa in hand. Someone careened into her as she pried her cell from her pocket.

"Cody, watch where you're going!" a mother scolded the little boy sprawled on the floor.

Sofia reached for him, helping him to his feet.

Cody, sprawled in the middle of the street after being hit by a car, blood trickling from his skull into a nearby storm drain. His dark eyes open and staring.

"Sorry about that," the young mother said, flashing a smile.

"No problem." Sofia blinked out of her stupor. Yet another symptom of her illness: insanity! She looked again at the name on the paper and dialed.

"This is Sondra. How may I direct your call?" a pleasant voice answered.

"Um, hi, I, uh, found this number on Dr. Bylun's blog. I'm not sure he can help me, but I would really like to speak to him."

"We have a *Mr.* Bylun, but he doesn't have a blog. Perhaps you have the wrong number?"

"Okay, I admit someone else said they found this on his blog and said I should call," Sofia said. There was a moment of silence, and she could almost see Sondra assessing what to do.

"Why don't you leave me your name, and if Mr. Bylun believes it in his best interest, he'll return your call." The cryptic response made her hesitate. Sofia sighed and raked a hand through her hair.

"Why not. I don't have anything to lose. My name is Sofia Fast from Crystal City, Virginia."

"And what is your call regarding?" Sondra asked.

"I'm sick. I have some sort of disease no one can diagnose, and one of my coworkers gave me this number to try."

"Who referred you?"

"Jake Hampton." She heard the secretary typing.

"I'm afraid he's not in my system," Sondra said. "I'll deliver your message. Please don't be surprised if Mr. Bylun opts not to return your call."

Sofia hung up and stared at the number on the paper, wondering if Jake had lied to her or if he flat out screwed up the number. He really wasn't a man of detail, which was why she was so surprised to see him working as a financial planner. She'd definitely never trust her money to him. Her cell rang, and she recognized her doctor's number.

"Ms. Fast, this is Linda from Dr. Mallard's office," an older woman's voice said.

"Hi Linda."

"Dr. Mallard wanted me to give you a call and schedule an appointment for tomorrow morning, first thing."

"Oh, God, what's wrong now?" Sofia exclaimed and balled up her free hand into a fist until her nails bit into flesh.

"The specialist he flew in from Zurich arrives tonight. He's apparently really interested in meeting you."

"Really? I'd love to come in. What time do you open?"

"Seven. I'll schedule you for seven-fifteen so Dr. Mallard can get his first cup of coffee," Linda said.

"That's awesome, Linda. Thank you so much for calling!"

“No problem. We’ll see you tomorrow at seven-fifteen.”

Hopeful, Sofia crumpled up the paper with Dr. Bylun’s information. If Dr. Mallard’s international guest was that anxious to see her, he must know what was going on! She sipped her cocoa, cheered by the thought of soon knowing what was wrong with her.

The sound of screeching tires and a scream drew the patrons from the coffee shop to the window. Sofia stuffed Dr. Bylun’s paper into her empty cup, tossed it, and joined the onlookers lining the street. Somewhere a few blocks away, an ambulance wailed. A drunk man staggered from a dark blue BMW. She walked up the street to a better vantage point, curious to see what he hit.

She froze at the sight straight out of her vision-- the little boy, Cody, spread-eagled in the street near the storm drain. His mother was hysterical, screaming at once at the driver and her dead son. Coldness seeped through her as she watched the familiar scene before her. In the distance, she heard her cell phone ring. It ceased and began to ring again. As if in a dream, she pulled it free and answered.

“Ms. Fast?” The deep baritone voice pierced her thoughts. “This is Damian Bylun. You left a message with my receptionist?”

Her world was beginning to spin as she realized her vision had come true. Her legs felt weak, and she sat heavily on the curb, struggling to control her breathing so she didn’t pass out.

God, what’s wrong with me? I saw him die ...

“Pardon?”

Realizing she clenched the phone in her hand, she locked the screen and sat staring at the asphalt. Someone touched her, and visions flared across her mind. *A pretty brunette, mugged in a back alley, raped and killed.*

“Hey, are you all right?” someone else asked. As the man took her arm to help her stand, his haggard face appeared in yet another vision. *An older man with dementia left to rot and finally die in an old folks’ home.*

“Get away from me!” she cried, tearing her arm away. She fled, staggering as she bumped into more people and more visions flashed. She ran until the cold air burned her lungs and the people were far behind her. She retreated to her apartment, breathing raggedly, with cold tears stiffening her cheeks.

She closed and locked the door behind her. She froze when she saw the disaster that was her apartment. Everything was overturned or shredded, from the furniture to the bookshelves to the TV lying on its face. The windows were open and the apartment cold.

Her headache was now a migraine, and she shielded her eyes against the light from the street that filtered past her honeycomb blinds. She all but staggered into her bathroom. She wrenched open the medicine cabinet for the most powerful of the drugs Dr. Mallard prescribed for her and slammed the cabinet shut.

Her eyes were fully silver, swirling and glowing in the dark bathroom.

“What is wrong with me?” she screamed, slamming her fists against the mirror.

Her blood spattered on the wall, and buzzing filled her ears. She sank to the floor. Her phone began to ring again as she slid into a dead faint.

CHAPTER TWO

*Sonoran Desert, Arizona
The White God’s Headquarters*

Damian Bylun stared at the phone. It was a cold day in hell when someone dared hang up on the White God, the Defender of Mankind, the Tamer of Evil. Or, in the words of his closest friends, the BS Master of the Universe.

His phone rang, and he answered, expecting the woman to return his call with a few dozen apologies.

"Damian, I'm one of your ... employees. My name is Jake H, employee number 0092841."

Damian opened his PDA to do a quick search on the number. He didn't know the names of everyone in the latest generation of his Guardians yet, especially not those working in the field.

Jake H. Organization year: 2000. Only his undercover agents contained such little information in his database. Jake was risking getting caught to call him.

"Where are you?" Damian asked.

"NOVA Sector HQ."

"Stay there." Damian hung up and looked at his executive officer and sparring partner. "Han, I'm going away for a few to the Northern Virginia Sector. Don't hold up dinner on my account."

Han nodded, and Damian trotted into the 20,000-square-foot mansion in the middle of the Arizona desert he called home.

"Say hi to Laney!" Han called.

Damian waved to show he'd heard and then took the stairs two at a time to his room. He changed into all black and strapped a sword to his back before closing his eyes and envisioning the interior of NOVA Sector. In a blink, he'd Traveled there. One foot was immediately soaked. He looked down as two of his Guardians hopped up from their positions.

"Who the hell put a pool here?" he demanded, pulling his right foot out of the shallow end of an in-ground pool. The two Guardians looked at each other, neither certain how to respond.

"It was a brutal summer," an amused voice said. Han's brother Laney, one of Damian's oldest Guardians and the station chief for NOVA sector, leaned in the doorway to the main house with a smile.

Damian walked over to him. "Laney, good to see you," he said warmly, clapping him on the arm. "One of your boys called me."

"Yeah, he's been pacing like a madman for a couple of hours. He's a newbie. Be gentle."

"It's fucking cold here," he complained as he walked into the two-story house in suburban Washington, DC.

He saw the man who had called him pacing as Laney had indicated. Jake turned and stared at him, dropped an awkward bow, and straightened, his mouth lax. Damian sat down on the arm of a leather couch, accustomed to the reaction, and pulled off his boot to drain the water.

"You gonna talk or stare?" he challenged. Jake looked at Laney, then at him.

"I found someone," Jake said.

"A Natural?" Laney prodded.

"I don't know what she is. I was embedded at this company we know is operating as a cover for Czerno's operations. I ran into someone I knew from college," Jake said and began to pace again, half-lost in his thoughts as he spoke. "She's something. I don't know what."

"Can you expand a little on that statement?" Laney asked.

"She's started having symptoms that the doctors can't figure out what's wrong. She turned twenty-four two months ago and started having all these issues, like she's a vamp. She can't go out in sunlight ..." Jake trailed off, deep in thought. "You're going to think I'm crazy-- "

"Already do," Damian said. "You wanna tell me why I'm here? Where are you even working? Your file was locked."

"I'm a plant at a front company we know one of Czerno's most trusted lieutenants uses to launder money," Jake said. "I recently gained access to this database that the company's owner uses. I was looking for Czerno's bank accounts, but I found this bizarre file on her instead. Her phone and computer are monitored. They have records of her vitals-- like her body temperature and shit like that-- and copies of her medical records. I found an email the owner sent to an email address we know Czerno uses. It says they want to force the transformation."

"She's a Natural," Laney said, frowning at him. "Treat her like any other. We'll assign her a Guardian and bring her in."

"No," Jake objected. "The email said she'd be ready soon for the procedure Czerno wants her to undergo. A medical procedure where he's going to drain all her blood and replace it with his."

Damian held up his hand. He'd begun to think their recruitment standards were slipping until Jake mentioned the operation. Surprise trickled through him. He recognized the procedure but hadn't heard of it being used since before his brother, Darian, had died thousands of years ago.

"What else did the file say?" he pressed.

"Nothing really. Just said he wanted it done soon because he wasn't taking any risks, even if she hadn't started transforming yet. I gave her your number, but I doubt she called."

Only an *Oracle's* blood was drained to force her to bind with her master. The measure was taken to give him unfettered access to her visions. Century-long wars had been fought in Damian's father's time over who claimed a discovered Oracle, no matter how competent the Oracle turned out. He met Laney's gaze.

"It's virtually impossible." Laney voiced his same thought.

"There haven't been any in tens of thousands of years," Damian said slowly. "What else, Jake?"

"That's it. I just have this feeling..." Jake said, his face troubled.

"You have a Traveler assigned to station, Laney?" Damian asked. Most stations had one of the Guardians-- or Naturals-- capable of Traveling great distances the way he did, by using magic to slip through space and time and end up elsewhere. Laney lifted his chin toward Jake, who nodded. "Watch her. If anything funny happens, bring her in, straight to my headquarters outside of Tucson. Don't take any chances with this one. Got it?"

Jake nodded again.

"Laney, tell Dustin what's going on. He gets pissy when you all call me directly without letting him know," Damian said.

"Will do."

Damian closed his eyes and opened them, materializing in his suite in Tucson. He stood before the low-burning fire, golden eyes swirling as he thought quickly.

A few Naturals were found every year, and he didn't bother to remember their names in an organization his size, leaving that level of detail to his most trusted men, the two regional commanders, and dozens of sector commanders worldwide. An Oracle ... now *that* was worthy of his attention. There had been none since Claire, whose powers had been so weak, she couldn't even be blood bound. The last blood-bound Oracle was Damian's mother, who went mad soon after his birth.

He who binds the Oracle, binds the future, his brother had once told him. His phone dinged and drew him from his thoughts. A text popped up.

Bro, ur supposed 2 tell me when u visit.

Damian grunted, expecting Dusty's message. His regional commanders were the only two people in the world who would challenge him: the cold master assassin in charge of the western hemisphere and the warm master negotiator in charge of the eastern hemisphere. As different as night and day, they were his adopted brothers-- and the only men in the universe he trusted with his life. Of the two, Dusty was more likely to call him to the floor when he crossed into his business. As their king, Damian owed them nothing. As his adopted brothers in the war against evil, the two of them were his equals.

He typed a response. *Next time, boss.*

He left his room for his office. The quarterly conference held four times a century with the highest ranking station commanders was coming up soon, and he had more pressing issues to resolve before it launched. He entered his office and froze, sensing the presence of the otherworldly being.

"Y'all need to learn to ask before setting foot in my house," he warned.

The middle-aged man with bright green eyes standing in his study looked harmless. His frame was slight, his hair silvered, his smile fatherly. Damian knew better than to trust the deceptive appearance of this type of creature. They were some of the most ancient beings in the universe, those whose first war drove immortals out of their world and created the mortal world.

Their second war almost destroyed the mortal world and ended in the Schism, the divorcing of the divine world from the physical one. They stranded the White and Black Gods on earth, preordained to be at each other's throats for all eternity. The Watchers then relegated themselves to the role of a benevolent audience in the bloody basketball game that was Damian's war.

"Forgive me, *ikir*," the Watcher said with a bow of his head.

"You're here to fuck up my life, aren't you?" Damian challenged. He crossed his arms to display roped forearms and sat on the edge of his desk.

"I've always enjoyed this era of the White God," the Watcher said and smiled, genuine mirth in his unblinking gaze. "You have a spark your forefathers didn't."

"I'm glad I entertain you," Damian said flatly.

"No disrespect meant, *ikir*." The Watcher's eyes went around his study, as if this was his first visit in a great while. Damian didn't trust the beings that saw all, knew all, and yet spoke in riddles-- if they chose to speak at all.

"You here just to visit?" he prodded at the Watcher's silence.

"No, *ikir*. I will be in your territory for some time."

The words were the first sign of something very, very wrong. Damian's unease grew.

"There is a disturbance in the uh, basketball game, as you call it," the Watcher said. "One of the teams is cheating."

"Czerno. How bad is it?"

"Bad enough to change the final score."

Damian mulled his words, waiting for more.

"There are Watchers who have left the crowd for Czerno's team. They're coaching him," the Watcher said softly.

"Damn," Damian breathed. "The last time y'all fought, you nearly destroyed the universe."

"Our war has again spread to yours," the Watcher acknowledged. "I am bound by the oath of non-interference I took at the Schism. I, too, can only ... coach, though I will choose when and where."

"So I shouldn't be surprised to see you in my territory, and I shouldn't expect shit from you," Damian surmised.

"Yes, *ikir*."

"How long will you be coaching in my territory?"

"It may be awhile by earth standards. Those coaching Czerno are shifting the future daily."

Damian hadn't expected his day to be so eventful. If the Watchers were once again bringing their battle to earth, it meant the Original Beings imprisoned by the Schism were stirring up old divisions again. He was too young to know much about those beings or much about the Watchers. Jule, the regional commander for the eastern hemisphere and the oldest of the three of them by far, had come from the same world as the Watchers but refused to talk about it.

"That is all I will say, *ikir*, except to remind you that the White and Black Gods cannot kill one another directly. To do so would release the Original Beings, and then things would really be bad."

Damian's jaw clenched. He didn't often feel helpless, not when he held the powers of a god among humans. But Watchers played on a different level. He was restricted to the physical world by the Schism despite his god-powers. By and large, the Watchers did whatever the hell they wanted. That this one had come to him with a warning was the most he could expect.

"By your leave, *ikir*," the Watcher said and bowed his head again.

"Try not to screw up too much of my shit," Damian returned.

The Watcher nodded and disappeared in a wink of light.

First a possible Oracle, then a Watcher. He had a feeling the war was just starting to get interesting. Damian crossed to his window and gazed out at the setting sun. Chances were, things were about to get ugly.

* * *

The next morning, Sofia awoke stiff and cold on the bathroom floor. Her apartment was cold, and sunlight streamed through the blinds, making her head pound harder.

"Oh god, Sofia!" Jake's voice came from the doorway of the bathroom. "I've been trying to call ..." His voice trailed off as he took in her bloodied hands and the pills scattered all over the bathroom floor. "You tried to kill yourself!"

"No, Jake," she mumbled and pushed herself up. She sat on her knees for a long moment. Jake reached for her, and she recoiled. "Don't touch me!"

"I've gotta get you to the hospital!" he said, grabbing her arm.

The visions started. *Jake cleaved in two by a maniacal man with a sword.* She shoved him away, landing hard on her backside while he careened into the bathroom wall.

"No, Jake. Leave me be!" She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, hiding her face from the light. She shivered from cold and pain. He brought her a blanket and draped it over her. "Jake, something is really wrong with me."

"No, really?" he retorted. "Did you call Dr. Bylun or not?"

"He didn't want to talk to me."

"Even when you told him your issues?" he asked, disappointed.

"I couldn't get past his secretary." She saw Cody's broken body again in her mind and pushed it away. Every vision she'd had, even when Jake touched her, had been of death.

"That's strange. He should've called you."

Her phone rang, and she saw Dr. Mallard's number flash on the screen.

"Hi Linda," she murmured.

"Sofia, this is Dr. Mallard. We were expecting you at seven-fifteen."

She glanced at her watch. It was nine. "I'm sorry, doc. I overslept."

"It's important Dr. Czerno sees you this morning. Can you come in?" he asked.

"No, no, my eyes are too sensitive."

"Why don't we do an old-fashioned house call and come to you?"

"Well ..." She hesitated, surprised at his persistence. She could see a shredded couch cushion and broken glass in the hallway outside the bathroom door and recalled the shape her apartment was in. "Doc, I'll come in tomorrow. I'm not having a good morning."

"Hon, this is important. Dr. Czerno believes you'll begin to have more symptoms soon, ones that might indicate the disease is accelerating."

"Symptoms, like what?"

"Hallucinations. Paranoia. Sense of doom."

"Doc, I..." She couldn't bring herself to tell him about the visions.

"Here, let me put you on with Dr. Czerno." There was the sound of a phone being shuffled from one person to another, then a flat, deep male voice.

"Sofia, this is Dr. Czerno. It's imperative you see me at the earliest opportunity."

"Doc, what's wrong with me?" she asked.

"I can explain in detail in person, but it's important I see you now." There was something about his tone-- flat and free of human warmth like the talking computer her blind coworker used-- that made her uneasy.

"I'll be in when I can, doc," she murmured. "Can you tell me what other symptoms I might have?"

"Have you experienced any of the symptoms Dr. Mallard described?"

“Yes.”

“And more?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about them,” he ordered.

No. Her instincts were restless, and every fiber in her body warned her not to respond.

“I’ll come see you right away,” she said, suspecting this alone would pacify him.

“Very good. I will be here. How far out are you?”

“About an hour.”

“I will see you soon. And Sofia, I don’t appreciate being stood up.” There was a warning note in his voice that made her more uncomfortable. She hung up. Her last hope for understanding what was wrong with her was someone she innately knew she didn’t want to meet.

“Who was that? Dr. Bylun?” Jake asked hopefully, reappearing in the bathroom doorway.

“No. Dr. Mallard. He flew in a specialist,” she responded, pulling the blanket over her head to shield her further from the sunlight. “I don’t think I like him.”

“I thought Dr. Mallard was the only doctor you hadn’t fired yet.”

“Not him. The specialist. He sounds like he’s from Russia. His name is Dr. Cicero. Or Zirno. Or something.”

“Czerno?” Jake asked in a hushed voice.

“Yeah, that’s it. You heard of him?”

Jake was so quiet, she thought he left until he spoke again.

“Sofia, will you come with me somewhere?”

“Not during daylight.” If not for the painful sunlight, she would’ve looked up at the hushed note in his voice. Her body was beginning to ache more, from her battered hands to her bruised cheek from when she’d fallen after fainting the night before. A deeper ache, as if she had the flu and every muscle in her body was on fire, was made worse by sleeping on the cold floor. She was in pain she didn’t understand. A tear trickled down her cheek.

She’d never been moody or wimpy or weak! In high school and college, she played co-ed soccer and basketball. Since leaving college, she’d stayed in shape through the local gym, where she lifted weights and forced herself onto a cardio machine twice a week. She wasn’t in tip-top shape, but she wasn’t *weak*!

“What the hell happened to your apartment?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you going to get up?”

“No.”

“You’ve always been so fucking stubborn. I’m trying to help you!”

She hurt too much to move. If she were perfectly still, she could deal with the pain.

“You want something to drink?”

Her head ached too much to respond. He returned a few minutes later and rustled her blanket, setting a cup beside her.

She drank the cool fruit punch, grateful as it chilled her parched throat. She soon felt relaxed and drowsy. When her phone rang again, she stretched for it and found she couldn’t move.

“Sorry, Sofi, but I’m taking you somewhere safe,” Jake’s voice warbled. “You gotta trust me.”

* * *

Jake watched her slump again and rubbed his mouth nervously. He snatched her phone as he squatted beside her and tossed it in the sink above their heads, stretching to turn on the water. He wasn’t sure how well Czerno was tracking her, but the Black God’s men had grown daring enough to tear apart her apartment. It wouldn’t be long before they came for her.

He lifted her and carried her to her bedroom, finding a spot on the bed that had avoided being shredded or covered with junk from her dressers. He quickly changed her out of her

clothes and into one of his own long T-shirts, fearing her clothing would be bugged. He dialed Laney as he moved around her room.

"Yeah," Laney's gruff voice came over the Bluetooth.

"I'm bringing in a package."

"The one D's looking for?"

"Yeah."

"You heard him-- ship it to Tucson," Laney instructed him. "She willing to go?"

Jake looked over at her still body, feeling somewhat guilty. Normally, Guardians were supposed to ease the transition of Naturals into their organization. However, he didn't have time to convince someone as stubborn as Sofi to do anything, and Czerno wouldn't wait for her to decide to go with Jake.

"More or less," he answered.

"Don't tell me. I don't wanna know," Laney said. "Take her there. Han knows you're coming."

"Thanks, boss," Jake said. "She's uh, a little bit asleep. Can you just let him know she's not really in any shape to meet D yet?"

"Yeah, sure," Laney said with a smoky chuckle. "Get outta here, kid."

"We're gone," Jake said with a grunt as he lifted her again. Laney hung up. Jake drew a deep breath, closed his eyes, and disappeared.

* * *

White God's Headquarters

Damian sat in his office before the computer, glancing between the instant messaging boxes popping up on one computer screen and the geospatial depiction of the past hundred years' worth of battles between his Guardians and the Black God's vamps on another screen.

"D, you coming down for the festivities? It's pretty interesting. They're acting out some bizarre kid's story for the cancer kids," Han said, ducking his head into the office.

"No. Talking to Dusty and Jule," he answered without turning. "Save me some cake."

"Sure."

"The girl still sleeping?"

"She'll be out for a while. Jake gave her enough that she should sleep for another day or so," Han answered.

"All right." Damian returned his interest to the displays, and Han closed the door softly.

Dusty, can you hear me?"

Dustin typed yes.

"What the fuck's wrong with your mic?" Jule, the regional commander of the eastern hemisphere, demanded with a laugh.

Don't know. IT issues.

"At least it's just IT," Jule responded, growing serious. At the pause, Damian knew they were all looking at the geospatial depiction. His gaze roved over Jule's European front. It was slowly being decimated and fragmented by Czerno's blood-sucking vamps.

"You've got a rat," he said, reviewing the past hundred years of battles depicted on the map. To humans, it would look like the natural give and take of a long battle. To the three of them, the drastic changes that occurred over such a short time span after thousands of years of no change were a warning sign.

Or more than one, Dusty typed.

"I think Dusty's right," Damian agreed. "You've got more than one rat to worry about."

"I have Antoine under surveillance. I have no leads on anyone else," Jule replied. "Thanks to Antoine, my spy network is shit right now. I'm rebuilding as fast as I can, but it ain't easy finding new Guardians, let alone those who make good agents."

"Discretion isn't a natural trait to Guardians," Damian said.

Just like their supreme leader, typed Dusty.

"What'd you do to him, D?" Jule asked. "He's been cranky all night."

"Chill, Dusty, it's not that serious," Damian answered.

An Oracle????? Not serious? Are you fucking insane? Dusty ended his message with a string of angry emoticons. Damian could feel his ire through the screen.

"It's not confirmed."

"Wow. Why didn't you tell him?" Jule scolded. "In fact, why didn't you tell me?"

"I just found out!" Damian snapped. "One of Dusty's newbies called me. If one of our guys calls, I'll go. They usually need something-- they don't call just to chat. When someone gives me some more definitive info on her, I'll tell you."

"Anyway, back to my concern," Jule said. Damian knew if they had video chat, he'd see Jule rolling his eyes. "I'm out of ideas for dealing with my traitor issue, unless Dusty can send a few spies my way."

I'm short, but I'll send you a couple on loan. Want me to talk to Antoine?

"Cool, bro, thanks. Fuck no on talking to Antoine. I need him alive and preferably in one piece, Dusty, unlike the last time I sent someone to talk to you."

"I'll come to Europe after the Quarterly with some reinforcements," Damian offered. "We may need to make a couple of less-than-discreet strikes at Czerno's strongholds to push him back and give us some time. Can you hold things down for two weeks?"

"I'll do my damndest," Jule replied. "Hey-- is it just me or is recruiting getting harder and harder?"

Definitely.

"Yeah. I think our traitors have some influence on that, too. I'm getting reports from the recruitment team that a lot of their newly flagged Guardians are getting whacked as soon as they make the list," Damian said.

Ask Claire what's going on, Dusty typed with a smiley face.

Damian grimaced, recalling the last time he'd seen the beautiful woman, his slain brother's wife. They never got any work accomplished when she was with him. They'd had a falling out a few hundred years before and hadn't spoken since. He wanted to keep it that way. Sleeping with her made him feel ... guilty, like he was betraying his brother's memory. Yet, she was all that remained of his brother, and he cherished the connection. He preferred to know she was alive and well-- and somewhere else.

"I'll assume by your silence you're still not talking," Jule said.

"Nope."

I'll give her a call. Maybe she can come to the Quarterly.

"Fuck you, Dusty," Damian said acidly.

"Damn women," Jule said. "I don't know why they say you can't live without them. I'm doing quite well."

Damian snorted, gaze lingering on the map. Something was really wrong in Europe, and he needed to figure out what, before the European front was overrun by vamps. His thoughts returned to the Watcher, and he wondered just how many of his problems were caused by traitors influenced somehow by the beings coaching Czerno. With any luck, his Watcher wouldn't fail him.

His phone rang. He glanced at the number and let it go to voicemail, not recognizing it.

"I've got two rotating to Tucson," Jule said. "They're en route. I want Han, though, D. You promised."

"I know, I know. He's sick of it here anyway."

A crash came from the hallway. By the sound of it, it was one of his favorite, *priceless*, Ming vases. With his luck, the kids were loose in the house. Irritated by the mention of Claire and the idea of his collectibles being destroyed, he snatched his phone to call for Han.

“Dusty, can you-- ”

A scream jarred him.

WTF? Dusty typed.

“What he said,” Jule echoed. “Everything-- ”

A second scream. Damian rose. His door flew open to reveal a huge, furry monster with fangs.

“What the fuck is going on? And why are you dressed like a sadistic teddy bear?” Damian demanded.

“You need to see this, D.” The Guardian’s muffled voice grew louder as he pulled the head off the costume. By his tone, something was more wrong than the horrible costume.

“Guys, we’ll talk later. D out,” he said into the mic before tossing it on the desk. “This better be good.”

CHAPTER THREE

The in-between place where Jake’s drugs put her were filled with horrifying visions of Cody and other strangers dying while Dr. Czerno screamed at her to return to him in his inhuman computer voice.

And *him*. Another ... thing ... had entered her nightmare and taken over. The dark monster sat in a dark corner of her mind and sobbed so loud, she thought them real. Once, she heard him call for help. She’d stepped near him in her dream, until he swiped at her, and she tried to free a scream from her frozen body. He retreated to the corner and sobbed while she fought the effects of the drug. The drug wore off, leaving her in a dark fog, hot and sweating with a different kind of headache, the kind she got after taking a lot of Dr. Mallard’s drugs. Groggily, she couldn’t remember taking drugs. She’d been drinking fruit punch when she felt drowsy.

Jake.

Furious, Sofia pushed off the bed coverings and stood, teetering dangerously before deciding to sit again. Moonlight drifted in through a window, and she stared in confusion. Her window was on the other side of her room. Disoriented, she stood up again and stumbled to the door.

She *hated* the headaches and feeling like shit! She couldn’t remember the last time she felt halfway decent. Determined first to get rid of her cotton mouth and then to kill Jake, she wrenched open the door, blinded by the hall light she didn’t recall leaving on. She shielded her eyes with one hand and walked down the carpeted hall, stopping when she realized her hallway didn’t have carpet.

Her vision was too blurry for her to see much beyond hazy shapes and colors. The carpet was a deep maroon, soft and cushy, the walls around her brown. She squinted through her fingers and braced herself against one wall to counter the effects the drugs had on her equilibrium as she moved down the long hallway.

“Jake?”

Suddenly, her bracing arm hit air. She tried to balance herself only to find herself toppling over and over and over down a stairwell. She landed hard on a cold floor. Pain roared through her, and she sought both to shield her eyes from a crystal chandelier blinding her and to grab her burning leg. She wore only a long shirt to her knees that twisted to her stomach with her fall.

“Oh, God!” she grated, pushing herself into a sit.

Her blood was a slash of stark red against a white marble floor. The pain in her leg cleared the haze of her mind, and she realized whatever was happening wasn’t a dream. Panic peaked as she looked around her. There was nothing familiar about her surroundings-- *nothing!* Down one hallway, she heard the ring of a phone.

Phone, police, help. Slowly Sofia stood. Her first step was disastrous. She careened into a table and heard glass crashing as the table corner tore a stripe down her forearm. Her eyes hurt too much to make sense of the world around her.

Voices prevented her from losing herself to her pain. They came from the same direction as the phone. Whoever had brought her here was coming for her.

Dr. Czerno. The monster in the corner.

Fear flew through her as she recalled the disjointed dreams. She turned, slammed into something twice her size, and fell backwards. Her hand dropped from her eyes to reveal a furry, fanged monster from a nightmare framed against the light.

Sofia screamed. It swiped at her, and she backpedaled, hopping to her feet. She ran into a blurry wall, shoved herself off, and smashed into another monster. With another scream, she bolted and careened into a door that gave.

The room was dark aside from curtains opened to allow the moon to shine through. She staggered up, cursing the drugs and Jake for her inability to balance, and slammed into several pieces of furniture as the monsters chased her. The lights went on. Blinded, she tripped over a stool and hauled herself into a corner, chest heaving and body slick with sweat and blood.

"What happened?" a muffled voice asked.

She hugged her knees to her chest and peered through her fingers. One of the monsters pulled off its head to reveal a man. She squinted, realizing the two furry brown monsters were men in costumes from *Where the Wild Things Are*. Several more men entered the library, all staring at her in nothing short of total surprise. Either they were all huge enough to come straight out of an action movie, or her drugs had not yet worn off.

"Gods, are you all right?" one asked finally, moving toward her.

"No!" she shouted. "Don't touch me, don't touch me, *don't touch me!*" The last thing she needed was more of the gruesome visions!

"Sofi?" Jake's stunned tone drew her attention. While surprised to see him there, she was struck by how well Jake fit in with the other men. He was built from the same mold-- large and muscular, the kind of man more fitted to military special forces or UFC prizefighting than financial planning.

The man approaching her had nearly reached her, and she huddled into a tighter ball.

"Han, don't!" Jake called. "Leave her be."

"She's bleeding to death!"

"Trust me. She'll go ape shit."

Sofia wanted to pound Jake's face in. Her heart raced to the point of pain, and she felt sick enough to puke.

"Go get D," the man called Han said. He squatted near her. "You okay?"

Her gaze cleared, and she focused on her surroundings. Her first impression was confirmed-- the men in the room were UFC material, all well over six feet and solid. They were all dressed for a white tie party in expensive tuxedos.

"I gave you enough drugs that you should be asleep until next week," Jake said, joining Han. He was also dressed for the exclusive party. Seeing him well rested and well dressed pissed her off even more.

"Can I help you up?" Han asked, extending his hand as if approaching a wounded animal. His brown gaze was friendly but cautious.

The others fanned out, and she suddenly felt like a lamb surrounded by a wolf pack trying to decide what to do with her. She didn't know these men, but her instincts told her they were 100 percent predators. They moved in tandem without looking at each other, their movements controlled and efficient. If she flinched, they'd snap in unison.

"What did you do to me, Jake?" she demanded.

"We'll wait on that," Jake responded. "There's a lot of blood. You okay?"

"You drugged me."

He rubbed his mouth.

"She's little, pick her up before D sees the blood all over the floors," another of the men urged.

"Don't touch me!" she warned again.

Despite being able to bench press two of her, the men actually listened.

"What happened to my floors?" a new voice demanded.

If the men around her were predators, the man who entered next was their alpha. Unlike the others dressed for a white tie event, he was dressed in leather pants with a tight black Pearl Jam T-shirt, his hair braided, a chain from his spiked belt to his wallet, and heavy black boots. She didn't miss the way the others moved out of his way or the way the aura of command around him filled up the room. His gaze swept around the room methodically, coming to rest on her. He approached with a slow, steady gait, like a predator inspecting its disabled prey before going for the kill.

She tightened into her ball. He was as large as the others, with olive skin, long white-blond hair, and golden eyes the unusual color of honey. His features were firm and chiseled. He was not a pretty boy but a man with rugged, bad-boy beauty and a slow sensuality about his movement that made her heart skip a beat despite her pain.

"You got blood all over my floors," he told her, his golden eyes taking her in. He knelt beside Han. She tensed.

"You can blame the Wild Things, D," Han said. "They scared the shit outta her."

D reached out to her, and she recoiled, pushing herself farther into the corner.

"Sofi, you shouldn't--" Jake started, eyes going nervously to the newcomer.

"Not gonna hurt you, okay?" D said, holding up his hands.

A sense of power swirled around him that scared her. She felt it circle her, prod her, and retreat. His honey gaze was similar to Han's: warm but wary. She ducked her head and braced herself as he reached for her again. His large hand was warm against her arm. No visions pierced her thoughts.

"See?" he said.

She looked up at him, surprised. By the look of understanding on his face, he knew what she expected to feel. Relief flooded her, and she flung her arms around his neck. She'd never known the power of a single touch until everyone who touched her hurt her!

"Sofi!" Jake exclaimed. He touched her arm to pull her free, and she jerked as dark visions crossed her thoughts. She wrenched away from both men and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, trying to stop the visions. D touched her, and the visions fled as if at his command. The warmth of his hand drifted up her arm and through her, comforting her.

"She's ... special, isn't she?" Han asked D.

"Very," D replied. "Nobody touches her."

His command was quiet and firm, but Sofia knew no man in the room would disobey a man like him. His hand lingered on her arm, and she rested her forehead against his fingers, comforted for the first time in months.

"Jake, clean up the floors," D ordered. "Let's get you upstairs," he said to Sofia.

He lifted her and carried her down the hall and up the stairs. Sofia's heart fluttered as she tried to take in the world of blinding lights and blurry colors. He turned the lights in her room on low and set her down on the trunk at the bottom of her bed. She drew her legs up, feeling vulnerable and scared in the strange place.

"Han, get me some warm water and washcloths. I'll clean her up."

She didn't miss the surprised look on Han's face. He obeyed. D disappeared into the bathroom adjoining her room and washed his hands. When he returned, he pulled a chair from the wall nearer her and dipped one cloth in water, tugging her arm away from her.

"I can do it," she said, resisting.

He gave her a look that said he didn't have all the patience in the world then pulled her arm free again.

"Han, bring up some food," he said without turning to look at the blond man in the doorway. Han disappeared.

Sofia was afraid to ask where she was, who the man was before her. Instead, she watched a man many, many times her strength gently clean the blood from her arm in unhurried, methodical strokes. His touch sent a tremor of fire through her, and she was embarrassed to feel her hormones stir.

Here she sat, covered in blood, drugged, one day from being all out crazy, then kidnapped-- and the sight of the man before her turned her on. What was wrong with her?

He was the sexiest man she'd ever seen, and the swirling aura of command only amplified his physical appeal. It didn't take much for her to imagine what the body beneath the tight shirt was like. Wide shoulders, chiseled chest, rippling abs ... even his scent-- of pure man mixed with the mystery of night-- lured her like an animal falling for a hunter's bait. His attraction was inhuman.

"You okay?" he asked, his quiet, gravelly voice making her heart quicken. He glanced up at her, amusement in the upturned corner of his full lips.

She met his gaze with a nod, and they looked at each other until her face flushed. She cleared her throat and looked down. The wound on her arm was gone. She pulled her arm from his grip and stared at it, twisting it left and right before lowering it.

In fact, she felt no pain at all, anywhere. She kicked out her wounded leg. It, too, was healed. All that was left was to clean the blood.

"I'm going crazy," she said, voice tightening. "Oh God, I'm going crazy!" Her vision blurred with tears, and she stood precariously.

"You're not so good on your feet yet," D said.

She felt his arms around her and leaned into him, surprised at how natural it felt to be held against a complete stranger who made her want to flee for the hills and strip naked at the same time.

"You're not going crazy," he assured her. "When you're well, we'll talk."

"You know what's wrong with me."

"Yes."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Damian Bylun. If I'm not mistaken, you called me for help." His warm chest vibrated against her cheek as he chuckled.

Suddenly, she wasn't so sure she wanted his help. Damian Bylun was not a doctor. Hell, she had serious doubts he was even human. She didn't know what he was, and she had a feeling he'd welcomed her into a world that belonged solely to him.

God help me.

* * *

Damian wasn't sure how someone going from the second to first floor had managed to get bloody enough to look like she crawled through a war zone. Most women were too intimidated to go near him, let alone get close enough to throw their arms around him. This one clung to him as if he were the only thing preventing her from being swept overboard. He'd watched her thoughts of him naked, flattered and turned on. It'd been too long since a *normal* woman overcame his first impression.

Of course, this was no normal woman. He reflected on the images in her mind when Jake touched her. The instincts of the newly minted spy were dead on. She was the greatest find since he'd taken over the war from his slain brother.

He tried to move away, unaccustomed to anyone touching him. She tightened her grip around him, and he was amused to think of himself as any sort of comfort to *anyone*, let alone a

little human like her. He hadn't held a woman in too long, and he'd never held one for the sole purpose of comforting her. She needed him. He was surprised to realize he liked the feeling.

Damian breathed in her scent, brutally aware that all that lay between her tight little body and him was a long T-shirt. He'd never been mistaken for a gentleman, but the woman shimmered with a sweet, pure aura that made him feel obliged to behave. Her turquoise eyes had been so lost and confused, he couldn't help but take pity on her.

Her eyes shimmered with more than tears-- they swirled with silver, the way the eyes of ancient Oracles did. He hadn't seen anything like her since he sat in his father's court as a child. "You're safe," he told her.

She sighed. With her large, two-toned eyes, flawless skin, and long, straw-colored hair, she resembled a doll. Hers was a cool beauty, and her gaze bespoke intelligence. That she was an Oracle was fantastic. A sexy Oracle? Nothing short of miraculous!

"She okay?" Han asked from the doorway. Damian heard the amusement in his voice. None of his men had ever seen a human woman throw herself into *his* arms. His own Guardians stayed out of arm's reach of him, and humans picked up and ran.

"Yeah, I think so," he said, drawing away. To his surprise, she'd passed out. He scooped her up and placed her on the bed, his gaze sweeping over her tiny, shapely frame. He felt unusually protective of the vulnerable human on the bed before him. Not sure what to make of her or what he felt, he led Han out and closed the door.

"I think I know the answer, but do we have any records that survived the Schism?" Damian asked, moving away from the door.

"Is she okay?" Jake asked anxiously.

"Kid, back off," Han warned.

Jake obeyed and darted to the bottom of the stairs, pacing.

"Not that I know of," Han answered. "There aren't any living Oracles to mentor her, either. Claire was the closest thing, but she never received the training because her power was too weak."

"That could be an issue," Damian said, gaze returning to the door he'd just left. "I don't know shit about training Oracles."

"I don't think anyone living does, except maybe Czerno. He knew enough to find her and plot to bind her to him."

The idea of something so sweet in Czerno's depraved hold irked him. He wouldn't let someone like her get stuck in the middle of their war.

"Most Oracles don't live long enough to be of use," Han added. "Or they're terrible."

Not this one. He felt it in his bones, just as he'd felt a soul-deep connection to her the moment he'd touched her. He pulled out his cell to text his confidants.

U still online? he typed.

Both Dusty and Jule responded with smiley faces.

B on in a sec.

"Han, until I let you go back to war, you'll be her bodyguard. She knows Jake. If he doesn't drive her as crazy as he does me, divvy up shifts with him," he said. "She's gonna have a rough time ahead of her."

"Most Naturals get a little more notice before transforming. I think she's already started?"

"Yeah, and she knows shit about us or what she is." Damian felt the unusual urge to look in on her again, to feel her soft skin against him once more and make sure she was safe. Shaking his head, he retreated to his office. He picked up the headphone-mic combo. "Either of you know anything about Oracles?"

Fuck no, typed Dusty.

"Nope," Jule seconded. "We were just discussing HQ. You having any issues?"

"You mean, like an influx of vamps to Tucson?"

Bingo.

"Yeah. If Dusty doesn't object, I might reorganize the southwest sectors. Something is up."
Do whatever you want. You always do, Dusty typed with another string of angry emoticons.

"Damn, Dusty, you're a jackass today," Jule said, amused. "You sure you don't have a woman plaguing you?"

Damian smiled, waiting for Dusty's response. He could guess what Dusty was pissed about, and it didn't have anything to do with women or rearranging his sectors.

Today's my birthday, dick. You forgot again.

"Oooooooooohhh," Jule breathed. "Another birthday? Not sure why you'd count at this point."

"I remembered," Damian said promptly. "You'd think after oh, a few thousand years, you'd remember, Jule."

"I'm sorry, Dusty. I owe you one," Jule said, chagrined.

No, you owe me about thirty. Thousand. It's not every day your little brother turns 300K.

"I forgot you're still a baby. I passed that mark a few hundred thousand years ago. I'll send you this video game I'm addicted to," Jule offered. "You might like it."

If you love me, you'll send me the blu-ray versions of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour.

"Ah, my love, your wish is my command."

Damian chuckled. At more than double both their ages, Jule was as old as the Watchers, exiled to earth after pissing off someone somewhere in the immortal world just before the Schism. He'd never said why, and Damian didn't ask.

"You happy, Dust-man?" he asked.

Yes.

Han knocked, and he looked up.

"Rainy from the Tucson Sector is here. They're having issues," Han said.

"Gotta go, boys," Damian said. "We'll chat tomorrow."

He pulled off the headphone-mic combo and rose. Ruling an empire wasn't getting any easier; he rarely had a minute to himself anymore.

"Let's go," he said to Han.

CHAPTER FOUR

*Northern Virginia,
The Black God's summer retreat*

Two rolled from his place on the concrete floor in the corner and unwrapped the ratty blanket he used to keep himself warm. His skin was cold to the touch; his breath hung in the air as he moved. His master didn't believe a slave deserved heat. He dressed himself mechanically and deliberately, hiding away the scarred body his master hated. Every day he awoke wondering what happened to him, but he remembered nothing beyond waking up the day before. The scars covering him from head to toe were from more than his master's beatings. They were too deep and knotted to be from the daggers or the whip or the hand strikes of his master and his master's men.

Pants, socks, shoes. T-shirt, sweater, gloves. He made a rhyme out of the process, though he'd forgotten it again this morning. He put on his hood last and tucked its edges into his sweater. Above all, his master hated his scarred face. He flew into an abusive rage when he saw it.

He left the basement and entered the heated first floor. It was time for his master's breakfast, so he went to the kitchens to fetch his food. The cook was afraid of him and left everything in one corner. He took his bread and canteen of water-- the morning sustenance for a slave-- and tucked them into a cargo pocket. He lifted his master's tray. It held breakfast for

two, and he racked his mind for who the other was. He couldn't remember-- he never did. He climbed the steps to his master's chamber and knocked.

"Come in, Two," his master replied.

He obeyed. The air of the dark bedroom smelled of sex and blood. He opened the windows, which did little to shed light into the stone room with its masculine, black décor.

"It's so creepy," a woman's voice complained.

When he turned to place their breakfast on the table near the patio, he thought he recognized her. Maybe when she came in. He must have seen her then. His master said a slave didn't need to remember anything but his master, and he didn't try too hard to remember her.

His master emerged from the bed, naked. His hair was silver, his body broad-shouldered and muscular. His visitor wore a T-shirt and had hair the color of last night's sunset.

"I don't know why you bother with *it*," she said in disdain, looking at Two the way his master did.

"Your breakfast is served," Two said automatically.

"I see that, you fucking idiot," his master said and slapped him.

Two took his place in the corner, where he stood all day, no matter which room his master was in, in case his master needed him.

"Now that you're here, my lovely Claire, you can help me nail that son of a bitch for good," his master said. "Between you and the Oracle, there's no stopping me."

"Anything for you," she said.

They looked at each other. His master glanced over to make sure Two was in his assigned corner, and then pulled off the visitor's clothing.

"I want him to watch," his master said, "while I fuck you every way I know how."

His woman laughed huskily and approached Two naked. Her body was beautiful, curvy, with large breasts. He thought he remembered seeing her naked before, maybe when she arrived last night. He didn't know for sure.

"This is for you," she said and returned to his master.

Two watched them tumble into bed and fuck for hours, wondered why she seemed so familiar, before deciding his master was right-- slaves were too stupid to remember.

* * *

Sofia tried to focus on flipping through a magazine. The mansion's heavy drapes on the ground floor were closed and the lighting in the library dim enough for her to tolerate. She'd roamed the ground floor before adopting the library as her favorite room and settling in front of a deadened hearth with a stack of celebrity magazines.

The monster in the corner of her mind was a man, shrouded in darkness. He wasn't a nightmare or vision-- this much she knew. Since her dream, she'd heard him even when she was awake. His crying and shifting distracted her from the strange world around her and made her head pulse, as if he were trying to pry his way into her unwilling mind.

"You're still pissed at me?" Jake asked from his seat nearby. "I brought you here, didn't I?"

She gave him a withering look, wondering what crack he was smoking to think he did her any favor by bringing her here instead of to a hospital. He'd followed her around all morning, and she was sick of him.

"Come *on*, Sofi, I'm trying to help you."

"Okay, fine," she said, tossing the magazine. "Tell me where I am, why I'm here, and what's wrong with me."

"I can't."

"Then leave me alone."

Han chuckled from his position near the window. He was pretending to read a book, though she suspected he'd been emplaced as her bodyguard. He'd followed her and Jake all around the house earlier like a bored puppy.

"Han, you following me to the bathroom, too?" she challenged, standing. He snorted. He remained in the same spot until she returned. So did her lying, cheating bastard of an ex-boyfriend.

"You're in Arizona," Jake said as she resumed her defensive position in the library's most comfortable chair. "This is one of D's compounds. It's where we come to ... be safe."

"Who is 'we'? Safe from what?"

"You've always had this problem," he said, standing. "You're stubborn, suspicious of *everyone*, and you ask so many damn stupid questions."

"I have every justification to be suspicious of *you*, Jake," she reminded him.

"Here we go again. Maybe if you didn't suffocate me, I-- "

"Suffocate? You sleaze ball! You couldn't keep your hands off-- "

"You two know each other?" Han asked, lowering his book.

"Unfortunately," she snapped.

"Hey, now, I did bring you here and try to help you," Jake pointed out.

He was right, but she didn't want him to know she knew it. She'd long since forgiven him for cheating on her. They'd dated only for a couple of months, and she knew he wasn't right for her the first date. But he was so handsome, and she so amazed he wanted to go out with her, that she ignored the instincts warning her it would never last. As usual, they were right.

"You're a pain in the ass," he said with no heat.

"I'm sorry, Jake," she said. "I don't hold our past against you at all. I'm just ... really frustrated right now."

"I'm a target of opportunity," he said. "I know. It's okay, really. I just wish you'd trust me. I'd never hurt you, Sofi, and I hope you know that and can trust me enough to know you need to be here."

"*Our* past," Han mullied. "Anyone care to share?"

Jake ignored him, and she shook her head. Her gaze turned to the curtain, where not even a lost sunbeam could enter the room. Struck by longing, she gave a soulful sigh.

"Can I ever go outside again during daylight?" she asked.

"Yeah, after the transformation is complete," Han responded.

"Transformation?" she asked.

Han opened his book again, jaw clenched.

"Han, what do you mean?" she prodded. "What am I transforming into?"

At their silence, another thought hit her.

"Jake, am I a vampire? Were you joking?"

"You're not a vampire," he assured her. "They're not intolerant to daylight like you are. We'd have to kill you if you were anyway." He was serious, and she gaped at him. "They are *not* cool. Right, Han?"

"Yep."

"Who can tell me what's going on?" she demanded.

"D," the two responded simultaneously.

Damn. The thought of him made her feel like a girl in junior high being asked to her first dance. Or a drugged rabbit wandering into a hungry bear's den. She wanted to see the mysterious D and couldn't repel his magnetic draw. Even now, her heart quickened and her thoughts raced to the image of him in tight black clothing.

"Most people react like that," Han stated. "Not many willingly confront him, especially when he's in one of his moods. Smart girl."

She wondered what he meant. She didn't fear him-- she wanted him. Did most people want him? What if he was the only person on the planet that could ever touch her again because of her wacky visions?

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Outside," Jake said. "If you're brave enough, you can see him when he's back."

"And why should I be brave? What's wrong with him?"

"You're right-- she does ask a lot of questions," Han said.

"See?" Jake exclaimed. "I told you!"

"New rule, Sofia. If you have questions, ask D. We're not at liberty to discuss much with you."

Frustrated, Sofia stormed out of the library. Standing in the hall, she couldn't stop the fear that slid through her. This world ... *their* world ... was nothing like what she knew. She felt like she stood at the door of a plane fifteen thousand feet in the air getting ready to skydive, only she didn't remember packing a parachute. Her headache had been gone most of the morning for the first time in months, until the monster in her head started clawing at her mind.

She put on her sunglasses and started toward the one part of the house Han had warned her away from: the patio that led into the gardens. God help her, she was going into the sunlight no matter how much it hurt!

The light beyond the solid French doors made her flinch, but she forced herself to cross the doorway. The shaded patio was as wide as the mansion, with two small outdoor bars and groups of chairs around tables. Signs of the party the night before still remained, from the garbage bags awaiting pickup to one table with two wine glasses still present.

She began to sweat before reaching the door leading from the patio to the green blur that was the gardens over which the patio overlooked. She couldn't make out what was in the garden, but she heard the sounds of fountains and saw the dark green blur of a forest in the distance. By the time she reached the patio door, her skin was clammy, her heart racing.

She emerged into the bright light of a warm December afternoon and began to melt. There was no denying the sensation of sweat dripping off her body. She closed her eyes against the sunlight and took another two steps into the garden. Grass tickled her toes.

It was *hot!* She retreated to the patio and fled into the house, relieved when the sun was gone. Tears stung her eyes.

"You okay?" Han asked, his form blurry in front of her.

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" she growled. "No, I'm not okay! What normal person can't go outside? You all kidnapped me, drugged me, dragged me to Arizona-- if I'm really in Arizona-- and you won't tell me why or what's wrong with me! And you know what else? I hate peanut butter. Hate it, hate it, hate it, and I can't stop eating it! I hate it!"

Embarrassed by her words and the tears streaming down her face, she ran past him and up the stairs leading to the second floor, issuing a cry of frustration when she realized she didn't know which of the three wings led to her room.

"Turn right, three doors on the left," Han called.

She followed his directions, slammed her door closed, and locked it. She collapsed onto her bed and sobbed, the man in the corner sobbing with her.

Outside her room, Han whipped out his phone to text Damian with an irritated sigh.

* * *

Your Oracle's a pain in the ass.

Damian glanced at the new text message from Han before his gaze returned to the small base camp tucked between two ridges in the Tucson Mountains. He smiled faintly, knowing how hard it was to rile up his trusted Guardian. Unfortunately, none of them knew what to do with an Oracle.

"Wish you had good news for me," he said to the Guardian standing beside him.

Rainy, a brooding Guardian with striking green eyes and a shock of dark hair, was his youngest station chief at a youthful two thousand years old. Damian followed him across the dusty landing pads to the helo-hangar. His phone dinged, and he looked down at one of the zillion text messages he received from any number of his Guardians every day.

The base camp housed the emergency response helicopters for Tucson and neighboring sectors and was manned with a skeletal crew of Guardians and one on-duty pilot, a Natural who'd been trained to fly.

On a good note: logistical arrangements for Quarterly completed, Han texted. Pleased that one thing was going right, Damian tucked the phone away.

"The vamps have been conducting surveillance on us for weeks, but they just now started to act up," Rainy continued. "We didn't catch on until one of the new Naturals we just discovered was able to track them."

"A tracker?" Damian asked, impressed. "Impressive. Haven't seen one in a few thousand years."

"That's what Han said. Good timing. Had to be a woman, though."

Damian looked at him, touching his thoughts long enough to realize Rainy had *volunteered* to take on the bodyguard assignment to the beautiful woman in his thoughts. He hid a smile as Rainy turned to him.

"Four safe houses in six days have been destroyed," he said. "All in Tucson."

Damian sobered, troubled by the news. It was how the destruction of the European front started. The safe houses dropped like flies, then the spy network, then the sectors' headquarters. He didn't know where the leaks were coming from in Europe, and he definitely didn't know where they were coming from in Arizona.

"How many men you need?" he asked.

"To maintain our operations, three more. To get ahead of the vamps ..." Rainy shook his head. "At this rate, I don't know. Trac-- the Natural tracker was able to identify patterns in the attacks. *Ikir*, they're using our tactics against us."

Damian crossed his arms. It was the worst news yet. One of his Guardians was training the enemy.

"Traci's found signs of the vamps' surveillance around two more of our safe houses. None at your HQ yet or Sector HQ," Rainy added.

No one could find Damian's HQ unless they were on the guest list, or one of his Guardians revealed its location. He maintained a shield around it that made it invisible to those who didn't know where it was.

"Burn the six safe houses. What's the impact if we have to burn more?" Damian asked.

Rainy rubbed the back of his neck, pensive. "It leaves us with two, plus Sector HQ. *Ikir*, I think Tucson Sector is going to be completely compromised by Christmas."

"The Quarterly is coming up in a week," Damian said, coming to the same conclusion. "I relocate HQ after each one for security reasons. We'll evac all Naturals and Guardian assets from Tucson Sector after the Quarterly and send in a clean-up crew."

Rainy nodded, a look of relief crossing his features, and Damian saw his mind was on his Natural ward, Traci.

"I love clean-up duty," he said with a cunning smile.

Most Guardians did, including Dusty, who personally oversaw every one in his hemisphere. Damian issued few clean-up orders, for there was no way to maintain the discretion his Guardians needed to mask their shadow operations protecting humanity. It was loud and dirty, the type of work they'd ceased two centuries before when the human population exploded and globalized.

Damian thought hard. First Europe, then Tucson Sector. His mind traveled to the sexy Oracle, and he wondered if she'd be anything like the Oracles from his father's time. If so, he might have the key to crippling the cancer afflicting his operations. If she survived her transformation, that is.

"Keep me updated, and alert the neighboring sectors," he ordered. "How many Naturals you have in Tucson?"

"Only two."

"If you need to send them to HQ or want to evac Sector HQ, go ahead. Don't worry about knocking. I'll let Han know you all may be in."

"Thank you, *ikir*." Rainy's voice was quiet, and Damian sensed his heartfelt gratitude.

"Gods, she's got you mewling already," Damian couldn't resist saying.

Rainy tensed.

"No disrespect, Rain-man. Happy for you."

"You're not upset?" he asked warily. "Dustin says ..."

"... women are the true scourge of mankind. I know," Damian replied. "He tells me all the time."

"Actually, he said no relationships with Naturals," Rainy said, giving him an odd look.

"If there's one thing that drives Dustin crazy, it's being kept in the dark. Let him know *now*, before he accidentally finds out," Damian advised with a chuckle.

"Yes, *ikir*."

Even the younger Guardians referred to him by the ancient title that meant *my king*. Damian had long since lost any lofty delusions, but Dusty was a stickler for discipline and details. His phone dinged with a message from Han, and he pulled it from his pocket.

I don't know what to do with a crying woman, Han had typed.

Damian snorted then glanced at Rainy. "Gotta go, Rain-man. Call Dustin. I'll arrange for evacs and a clean-up crew."

"Yes, *ikir*."

He started to Travel to the Oracle's room but thought better of it. She was scared enough. He opened his eyes to face Han outside her closed door. His normally stoic XO appeared irritated.

"She won't come out, won't eat," he said. "Gods, I forgot how difficult it is raising Naturals."

Damian clapped him on the arm and opened the door. Her curtains were down to seal away the sunlight, and she was curled up in a ball in the middle of her bed with her back to the door. She wore jeans and a T-shirt, and her blonde hair fanned out over a pillow. The unusual sense of tenderness unfurled again in his breast. He sat down on the edge of the bed, brushing one blonde lock from her face.

Her eyes were swollen and red, the silver glowing in the dim light of the room. Fear and uncertainty crossed her features. The images in her mind were of a little boy dying in the street, of Jake's death, of the deaths of many others. At his touch, her visions quieted.

She closed her eyes and uncurled. He'd expected her original reaction to him to be born of shock, but she wrapped her arms around him once again. His body responded with a surge of desire he gritted his teeth against. The woman in his arms was too delicate, too vulnerable, to face the lusty beast within him. Instead, he shifted and wrapped an arm around her. He was beginning to like these peaceful encounters. He'd never known anything like them in his long existence.

"You need to eat," he told her.

"No."

"If Han hasn't told you, when I give an order, no one disobeys me," he said firmly. "Even crying women."

"Do you make many women cry?"

"You'd be surprised."

She withdrew her face from his chest and looked up at him, her silver-blue eyes filled with emotion. Her gaze was unusually steady and clear, as if she were already a legendary Oracle capable of seeing through whatever was before her. The air around her shimmered with subtle, calm power that thrilled him.

No, this Oracle wasn't another Claire, without potential or skill. This was an Oracle the world hadn't seen since before the Schism, the type of Oracle that belonged at her king's side.

Darian.

The woman in his arms ducked her head again and closed her eyes, missing the flash of darkness that crossed his mind and face. He pushed the thought of his slain brother away but couldn't escape the lingering sense of unease. He'd seen from burying his brother that a king's greatest weakness was the woman at his side. There were only two men in the world he'd entrust with his life.

Something about the woman made him think of things he'd not thought about in ages. There was a reason he banned thoughts of Darian and Claire from his mind, an instinct he'd never been able to face in all the years since Darian's death.

I don't know if I trust my wife, brother.

Darian's words haunted him again, and he quickly suppressed the memories.

"Sleep," he whispered, releasing a warm burst of power into Sofia.

Her body obeyed. He held her another minute, resting his chin on her head. His new Oracle was dangerous. He'd almost forgotten that the word for Oracle in his native tongue also meant soul-reader, the dual nature of a woman whose talent allowed her to see a person's soul and future with a simple touch. Her presence alone was already prodding free memories he'd thought he'd buried.

His heart skipped a beat as he realized that the last great Oracle, his mother, appeared just before the Schism, when the Watchers went to war and the universe was almost destroyed.

CHAPTER FIVE

The clang of steel and sound of jeering drew Sofia from her sleep to her window. The distant sky showed signs of growing lighter. She checked the clock on the nightstand then the notepad listing the time of the flight she'd booked the afternoon before after exploring the mansion. To her relief, she still had a few hours to sneak out and make it to the airport.

Several of the beefy men living in the house were in the grassy, well-lit courtyard, sparring with swords, knives, and other weaponry that looked like it came straight out of the Middle Ages.

Her gaze swept over them, stopping to rest on Damian. D wore judo pants low enough on his hips that she blushed as her gaze followed the trail of hair that disappeared into his pants. His tapered waist and hips and washboard abs were on display, along with the wide chest and thick back. She watched him move, his swordplay as graceful and fluid as it was lethal. A sheen of sweat coated his body, and his white-blond hair was back in a braid.

Even from a distance he drew her, and it was not just the chiseled body of a god. She could see him sitting on a golden throne or commanding legions of soldiers.

In fact, she *did* see him in those positions, and in many more. The visions were less invasive than those from others, like background music at a department store. She closed her eyes, watching the disjointed, fuzzy home videos playing in her mind. She saw a time before the emergence of human civilization, when his people ruled, a time when he was a prince among kings who grew up in the shadow of a war she couldn't see. Then there was the Schism and an era of disaster and grief, where his world collided with-- then severed from-- the human one, centuries where he was forced into the underground world as a prostitute, a beggar, a thief.

As silence fell over the courtyard, she opened her eyes. The men were dispersing, and her heart leapt when she saw Damian's gaze riveted to her window. His look was intense, much different than the warmth he'd displayed earlier that afternoon.

By the look on Damian's face, he wasn't happy. She wondered if he knew what she saw. She snatched her jacket and pulled it on as she raced down the stairwell and down the hall to the front door. She jerked it open only to have it pushed shut by an olive hand planted above her head. She cringed at the thick forearm brushing her ear.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately.

“For what?” His tone was measured. His scent drove her body wild, the mix of sweat, darkness, and man.

“I don’t know.”

His hand dropped, and she faced him. He stood before her as he had in the sparring ring, sans any clothing but judo pants. She felt dwarfed and delicate next to the mass of roped muscle and taut skin.

Heat rose to her face as she stared openly. His chiseled features were unreadable and hard. The sword was still clenched in one hand. The honey eyes were intent, his face flushed from exertion. She’d had never felt overwhelmed by a man before, and she’d certainly never been a woman who felt weak-kneed! She leaned back against the door, mouth dry and legs shaky.

“I’m not angry at you,” he said at last, taking a step back. “You have a rare ability among our kind. I didn’t realize you were as ... capable as you are. No one has ever been able to see into my mind.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m not going to eat you, so you can stop looking at me like that,” he said with a bitter edge that was lost on her. She looked down, near tears again. “That didn’t come out quite right.”

“Han said you’re moody.”

“He’s usually right. C’mon. We’ll talk.”

She trailed him up the stairs, taking in every inch of his perfectly round butt to his slender hips and thick back. She’d never seen a man so strong, and she couldn’t imagine talking to him without remembering how beautiful that body was. Thoughts of his sweaty body poised above hers made her want to swoon for the first time in her life, and her core ached so much from the vision that she gripped the handrail.

He led her to his private suite, which took up half of one wing. She sat in the living room as masculine as he, surrounded by wood, wool, and leather in dark colors. The window to a balcony was open, allowing in a cool night breeze that made the fire in the hearth dance. She pulled her knees to her chest, feeling small and vulnerable once more.

When he rejoined her, he’d put on a T-shirt and sandals. He leaned back in a chair across from her with muscular, feline grace, managing to appear both at ease and ready to pounce. They gazed at each other until she felt red creep up her neck. She looked toward the fire.

“Why can’t I touch anyone else but you without seeing ... horrible things?” she asked as the silence grew uncomfortable.

“In my world, you’d be called an Oracle, one who can see a person’s future by touching them.”

She stared at him.

“It’s a rare gift, trust me,” he said. “And a treasured one. You’ll eventually be able to see other things besides their deaths. Death is the only definite, and so it’s the first vision you see until you hone your skills.”

“It’s awful,” she murmured.

“As for me, well ...” He trailed off. “That shit doesn’t work on me. We’ll leave it at that for now.”

“I saw you ... I saw ...” She didn’t know how to say what she’d seen without seeming like the craziest person in the world.

“That is what we have to talk about,” he said, leaning toward her. “You will see my past. You will say nothing to anyone about what you see about me.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” she whispered, distraught. “I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

“I know. However, there are boundaries to your gift that I must give you now. It’s better you learn them from the beginning. One, no matter what you see, you are forbidden from telling the person exactly what it is. If you are asked, you can give them insight into their future, so long as you do not reveal everything. Two, don’t fuck with fate.”

"I can't keep such horrible things to myself."

"Three, you can't save the world," he replied. "You can tell me what you see, if you need to talk about it. Does that work?"

She frowned, unconvinced. He rattled off more rules, and she listened without registering any of them. What the hell was an Oracle anyway? How did one just morph into one? Maybe it was the mercury in the tuna she ate or the excessive amounts of chocolate. Could eating fake sweetener turn her into something like this? If so, what would hard water do to a person?

She laughed. Startled, Damian stared at her.

"Sorry. I was thinking ... it's stupid," she said. "I'm overwhelmed. One day I'm a boring financial planner, and the next day, I can't go out in sunlight and I see the future."

"You'll be able to go outside once you transform."

"What does that mean? Transform into *what*?"

"One of us. Our kind tend to live much longer than the average human. You'll finish transforming soon and will be like a human, just with a very, very long and extended life. Except..." He trailed off, giving her a considering look.

"Except what?" she demanded, panicking. "I have three eyes instead of two? I grow a tail?"

"Nothing like that," he assured her with a small smile. "One day, I'll tell you. You'll eventually have additional requirements to sustaining your body."

"When can I go outside?" she asked again.

"Soon."

They gazed at each other again, and she tried her damndest not to look away. A slow, languid smile crossed his features, one that made her body flush and ache for him. The vision of him on top of her protruded into her thoughts again. She looked away.

"I'll always win that game," he warned.

You have no idea, she mused. There were a great many things she'd let him do to her to win the game in her head.

"Like what?"

"You really can read minds," she whispered, stricken.

"Damn straight. And I'm willing if you're willing," he said with a smile that set her blood alight. He clasped his hands behind his head, giving her an unobstructed view of his body.

"I'm not some sort of floozy," she snapped, though she couldn't help wishing she was. "I don't sleep with random men, especially those who aren't ... you're not even human, are you?"

"Nope."

"What are you?"

"I guess you could say I'm a divine spirit of sorts," he said, guarded once more.

"A ghost?"

"Not that kind of spirit." He didn't expand, and she was too afraid to ask. "I'm going out for a meeting in about an hour. I'll probably be gone until noon or so. Han will be here if you need anything. Or, I can cancel, and we can live out the--"

"No, thanks," she said, standing and all but bolting out of his suite. Her head hurt again, this time from trying to digest what he was telling her. She could see the future and he was a ... what the hell was he?

He could read minds.

It made no sense, but neither did the sudden craving for peanut butter that dragged her to the kitchen, where yet another man she wanted to avoid was lounging. She snagged a jar of Jif and a spoon, retreating to her library. Jake followed, and Han was already waiting for her.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked.

"Transforming. Can't you tell?" Irritated he continued to disturb her peace, she leveled a glare on him.

He stalked off, and Han glanced down from his bored stare at the ceiling. She didn't care if he was miserable or not-- *she* hadn't ordered him to babysit her. A few minutes later, Jake returned with a jug of water, appearing less than excited.

"Your shift," Han said and rose.

Sofia retreated to her room, not wanting to fight more with Jake. She left the door cracked until she heard Jake greet Damian as the leader passed her room. After another half an hour, she gathered up a small backpack she'd found in a closet. The day before, she'd found quite a few treasures, to include the backpack, a flashlight, the key locker for the cars in the garage, and Jake's wallet, which happened to have a credit card, which she had secretly used to book a flight from Tucson to Virginia.

"I want to go out," she said and emerged from her bedroom.

"Great," Jake said, rising from his seat outside her door and trailing her down the stairs.

"To the airport," she added.

"That's a no-go, Sofi."

Ignoring him, she pulled out a set of keys and walked down the hall to the front door.

"Sofia," Jake called, trailing.

"You're not allowed to touch me," she reminded him.

"D is."

"D's at some meeting. Remember?"

He frowned but followed her into the cool, pre-dawn morning toward the garage. Damian had a lot of cars, and she found the black BMW whose lights flashed when she clicked the key fob. She climbed in. Jake slid into the passenger seat beside her, pulling out his cell as he did.

He dialed and spoke in a different language to the man on the other end. She tightened her grip on the wheel, assuming he spoke to Damian. He didn't appear out of thin air to stop her, and she made it from the mansion to the Tucson airport's arrivals drop-off area, where she stopped in front of the Delta curbside check-in sign and handed Jake the keys.

She was pretty sure Damian would find her no matter where she tried to go, but damn them all, she was going home.

Jake didn't follow her as she strode into the airport and checked in, careful not to brush up against anyone for fear of the jarring visions. She didn't relax until her plane was in the air, and only then was she able to loosen the muscles in her neck when she sat pressed against the window to prevent her elbow from touching the man beside her.

Several hours later, just as evening set in, she entered the disaster that was her apartment. Sofia dropped her backpack onto the kitchen counter, taking in the damage. She rummaged around one of the cupboards for her prescription painkillers, her head pounding.

"Hello, Sofia," a familiar voice said. "I was worried when you didn't show for your appointment."

She turned, startled to find the man in front her of the same make and mold as Damian's men. The doctor's eyes were the color of cold steel, his face stoic, his large form tense. His hair was silvered.

"Dr. Czerno?" she managed. "You're not a doctor, are you?"

"No, Sofia."

She stared at him and edged around the kitchen island. She darted for the door, but he snatched her arm. His visions were more than just his death; they were the first-person experience of the torturing and killing of many, many others, as if *she* were mutilating others. She staggered under the weight of them, dropping to her knees. He released her.

"I think you see what I am about," he said. Tears streamed down her face as screams echoed in her mind. "I can carry you or you can walk out."

"Walk," she managed, shuddering at the lingering visions that left an acrid taste in her mouth.

"Let's go."

She pushed herself off the floor and rose. The kind of creature that could do such things to other men left her no doubt he'd do the same to her if she didn't obey. She shivered and hugged herself as they emerged into the cool fall dusk. A chauffeur opened the door to a town car waiting at the curb nearest her apartment building. She looked up and down the street. It was busy enough; she might be able to lose him if she made it to a crowd of people.

As if hearing her thoughts, Czerno gripped her arm again. Sofia sagged, crippled by the burning visions. He shoved her into the car, and she crawled as far from him as she could. The car started up, and they merged into traffic. Czerno raised the privacy glass between them and the driver with the push of a button.

"Tell me, love, just how powerful are you?"

She shook her head.

"Still transforming, I see."

And he smiled, a cold smile that did not reach the death in his eyes.

* * *

Damian turned the cell phone back on and emerged into the warm evening air from the Marriott's conference room, the random place chosen by his spy chief for this week's intelligence briefing. The situation in Europe plagued him, as did the declining number of Guardians. This would be the first year he'd gone into the negative in a thousand of years. He was losing established Guardians-- mostly in Europe-- and an entire class of new recruits.

Dusty's suggestion to bring in every station chief for interrogation was sounding better. As a former assassin and interrogator, Dusty didn't much care for people to begin with. Dusty's skills were legendary, but Damian had held off on what he considered a reign of terror for his seasoned Guardians. Dusty's interviewees rarely lived through the ordeal, and Damian wasn't yet ready for that step. His cell rang before it could upload the number of voicemails and texts.

"I'm done, Han. What's up?"

"This message is from Dusty. He wants to know what the fuck you were doing that you couldn't answer your phone."

"I'll call him," he promised.

"We have a serious issue," Han said in a flat voice. "You need to get to NOVA *now*."

"Consider me there." He waited until he was out of sight of the hotel's cameras before traveling to Virginia with his magic. Han had never led him astray in the thousands of years as his XO.

"Bout time," Dusty said as he appeared.

Damian accepted his hand in greeting, looking around. The room was as still as a graveyard despite the dozen Guardians there. Dusty had called in the entire sector. If he were personally involved in the operation, something was very, very wrong.

"I think this is yours," Dusty said and handed him a few surveillance pictures taken of one of Czerno's safe houses in northern Virginia and an apartment building. Damian froze as he saw the photo of Czerno dragging Sofia to a car.

"How the fuck did she get to Virginia?" he roared.

"She flew," Dusty said, leveling a look on Jake, who stood in a corner with his head bowed.

Furious his order had been disobeyed, Damian started for the young Guardian. Dusty planted a hand in his chest.

"D, we need to get to her now. We know what he's planning," he said calmly. "You hear me? We know where he's taking her."

Damian met Dusty's clear blue eyes, blood boiling.

"C'mon, bro. If he finishes with her before we get there ..."

They were *fucked*. Damian forced himself to focus on Dusty, though he wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around the newbie's neck. The thought of Sofia in Czerno's hands did worse than anger him-- he felt *fear* for the first time in millennia.

"You know where she is," he said.

"Yes."

"We'll do this your way, Dusty. We raze the place. No survivors."

"We'll drop you in first," Dusty said. "Whatever you don't destroy, we will. I called in the DC Sector for support as well."

"He's going with me," Damian said, indicating Jake.

"Agreed. Jake, prepare yourself. You've got half an hour."

It was a death sentence, and Damian saw the realization in Jake's eyes before the newbie left for the weapons room. The other Guardians filed out in silence befitting a funeral.

"He's the only one at station who can Travel," Dusty reminded him.

"I don't give a damn. If we can't un-fuck what he did, Czerno will destroy humanity overnight." *And Sofia*, he added silently.

"I'll put out a recruitment requirement for a new Traveler," Dusty said and begin handing him weapons.

Damian pulled off his sweater to reveal a black T-shirt and tucked weapons into his cargo pants, boots, and pockets. They were silent, aware this would be one of the most crucial battles they'd encountered in ages.

"Is she like the Oracles in your father's court?" Dusty asked. "Does she understand how important her gift is?"

"Not yet," Damian admitted. "She's this sexy little thing with beautiful eyes. Lots of spunk and stubborn as an ox. Nice rack, killer legs. So sweet and innocent. Were we ever innocent?"

"Nope. We were damaged goods when we were dropped onto this planet."

He felt Dusty's thoughtful gaze on him and looked up from strapping a gun to his ankle. "What's up?" he asked, straightening. Dusty shook his head, though Damian saw his faint smile. "Bro, what's up?"

"Either you need a woman real bad or there's something special about this one."

"Hey now, don't insult my Oracle," Damian warned. "Assuming she survives tonight."

He ignored Dusty's intent look, aware his adopted brother knew when he was avoiding answering his question. Dusty was right on both accounts: he needed a woman, and this one was special. He didn't dare mess with an Oracle, though. It was common sense: never piss off the woman who could see the future, lest she alter it and make your life hell. Thousands of years hadn't given him much insight into a woman's way of thinking, but this he knew without a doubt.

"As if the European front wasn't enough," Dusty muttered.

"Tell me about it. After this is over, I'll tell you about the Guardian recruitment stats."

"Gods."

"Yeah."

Hang in there, Sofia.

CHAPTER SIX

They drove west, away from DC. Sofia watched the scenery turn from urban to rural and recognized the roads leading up to Skyline Drive, the scenic route running through the mountains of northern Virginia. The town car moved at a quick pace, bringing them to a mansion atop one of the private, gated drives tucked away from sight along Skyline Drive.

Czerno motioned her out of the car as it stopped in front of the Georgian-style manor house. Not expecting the dizzy spell, she staggered against the car, cringing away from Czerno as he snatched her arms and dragged her to the house. He released her and tossed his coat to a waiting maid before motioning Sofia to follow.

She followed, heart racing. She passed several men with guns hidden in the alcoves of doors as she walked. Upon passing the first, she realized they weren't men at all. No human's eyes glowed red, and their inhuman growls as she passed resembled those of animals. They watched her like they intended to make her their dinner. She hurried to follow Czerno, silently praying Jake ratted her out to Damian.

There were two other men in the study Czerno into which led her. The door closed behind her, and he pointed to a chair. She sat, taking in the Goth décor that made the study as welcoming as a graveyard. The other two men gazed at her. One was of medium height and slender, an older man with sharp green eyes the color of forest moss who seemed out of place in the middle of the room. The second was closer to Han's age with midnight hair and eyes.

Neither looked friendly. She stayed the urge to curl up in her chair, jumping when a shadow with lopsided shoulders emerged from the corner dressed like an executioner in black hood and gloves.

"Jilian, check her," Czerno ordered. "Two, prep the room."

The man in the executioner's hood left while Jilian, the man with midnight hair and eyes, approached. She blinked, shocked when he walked through the man with the green eyes as if he weren't there. Jilian wrenched her up. Visions slammed into her, each one as vivid as the next, the sights, smells, sounds. He was Czerno's personal hit man, an executioner with no heart or soul.

"Unbound," Jilian said, releasing her. She dropped into her chair, shaking.

"I'm impressed," Czerno said. "Bylun's gone soft."

"If he didn't act, there's a reason," Jilian observed.

"If he didn't act, I will," Czerno responded. "Get her ready, fast. Damian's not gonna sit around for this one."

Jilian grabbed her again, and she grated her teeth against the visions, staggering as she tried to keep upright. He led her down the stairs into a basement that looked more like a dungeon. One well-lit room gleamed with stainless steel. Until she saw the blood on the walls and ceiling, she thought it was a surgical room.

The torture room from her visions. Panic gripped her, and she tried to bolt. Jilian snatched her and slammed her onto the table, pinning her in place as he strapped her wrists and ankles in.

"Please don't--" she cried, yanking at her arms and legs.

"Shut up. The more noise you make, the worse I make it for you."

She obeyed, breathing raggedly. He retrieved a jar from the small refrigerator and laid it next to a surgical knife, a large rubber tube, and a huge syringe.

Oh, god, oh god, oh, god! Sofia pulled again at her bindings and closed her eyes against the blood splatters on the ceiling.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"You're the Oracle."

"I only see other people's fates, not mine."

"You see mine?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You die." *Horribly. At Damian's hands.* That Damian was capable of the same level of violence as these men reminded her that this world was nothing like hers.

"Guess they forgot to tell you I'm immortal," Jilian said and laughed. "Only Czerno or Damian can kill me."

I'm sorry, Jake. I'm sorry, Damian.

"I'm going to drain your blood," he said conversationally. "You should be grateful. Czerno wants this done his way, not mine."

From her visions, neither of them was capable of any measure of kindness. Tears trickled down her face, tickling her ears.

"Then we'll bind you to him."

"What does that mean?" she forced herself to ask to keep hysterics from claiming her.

"An Oracle must be blood bound to her master to be of any use and keep you from dying from the Transformation. We'll bind you to Czerno, and you'll serve him for all eternity."

His words were too extraordinary for her to understand fully, but she knew serving men like these *for eternity* was equivalent to living with the devil in hell. Her breathing stilled, and she strained against the bindings.

"Hold still. If I miss, I'll paralyze you for eternity."

He held up the long syringe. By the glimmer in his eye, he wanted her to move. Sofia closed her eyes. He injected the gel into her arm, and warmth spread through her. Sweat soon covered her, and her chest began to tighten.

"We have to kill you first," he said, crossing his arms and leaning against the counter. A slow, cold smile spread across his face. "I didn't use the cocktail mix. This might hurt a little."

Fire formed in her stomach, racing through her. The man in the corner of her mind stopped clawing at the edges of her thoughts and chose that moment to speak to her.

My name is Darian. Please don't leave me. You must live through this.

Sofia began to scream as her nerve endings sizzled from the inside out. She strained and bucked against the bindings, her body seizing. Darkness lingered at the edges of her mind but refused to take her. Instead, the agony grew, tearing her apart, cell by cell, while Jilian's laughter echoed in her mind.

* * *

The alarm sounded the second Damian materialized into the compound. He expected it to; he sensed Czerno as well as the Black God sensed him. He snatched Jake as a knife sliced through the air where the newbie appeared. Damian whirled, whipping out the sword at his back. He sliced through two vamps before shooting the other two in the small courtyard. Bullets rained down on them.

"C'mon!" He yelled and dragged Jake against the building and loosed part of his power to locate Czerno's position in the compound. Jake shot off a burst of rounds as several vamps raced across the courtyard, their red eyes glowing and growls loud.

"You okay?" Dusty's voice came across his earpiece.

"Great," Damian grunted. "You got the schematics on this place?"

"Here," Jake said, whipping out a PDA. He ducked into a doorway while Damian shot two more vamps and reappeared, the blueprints on the screen.

"Guide me in," Damian ordered.

"Tell me when you're ready for us," Dusty said.

"Will do. D out."

Jake led him into the Gregorian mansion, whose stone walls resembled an old school fortress. Czerno's affinity for castles meant they couldn't simply blow the place up and hope she survived an avalanche of stone. He had to find her fast.

Damian located the enemy ahead of them, shooting intersections clear as they reached them. Jake led him into a dark wine cellar, and they paused to reload. Czerno was moving somewhere behind the walls.

"There's another basement," Damian said, pacing the room in search of a door.

"It's not on the schematics," Jake confirmed. "You see a door?"

They heard a sound that made them freeze and look at each other. It was the scream of a soul dying.

"Sofia!" Jake breathed, guilt and anger crossing his face.

"Stand back," Damian ordered. "Cover the door."

He traced Czerno's path to locate the hallway behind the wall then placed his hands on the stones. They exploded into pebbles and dust. Light from the hidden hall filled the wine cellar. Jilian and a few other vamps were down the hall and turned as the stone wall caved. Sofia's anguished scream was still muffled.

"Sofia!" Jake shouted.

"D, watch out for Jilian. Czerno brought in fifty of his goons. Jilian's--" Dusty called.

"Jake!" Damian shouted as the Traveler disappeared. "Fuck!" He saw Jilian's blow cleave the Traveler apart the moment he materialized down the hall. Jake dropped silently. Damian charged Jilian, Czerno's longtime executioner. Jilian met Damian's sword with his own, barking orders to his vamps.

The screams stopped, and Damian's heart quickened. The period between when an Oracle could be bound and when she permanently died was brief. Jilian's men pounded down the hall. Damian gritted his teeth, unable to unleash the blow that could destroy them all in a blink without taking out Sofia as well.

"D!" Dusty called.

"Busy!" He whipped out the vamp-killing hand cannons and shot the first two of Jilian's men. Several rounds drove him back, and he ducked a blow aimed at his neck by Jilian.

"I'm here!" Dusty materialized beside him, his gun roaring in the narrow hallway as he mowed down Jilian's men.

Damian slashed through Jilian, and the vamp dropped. He hacked him apart until there was nothing but pulp.

"Laney, send in everything!" Dusty barked into his mic. "*Now!*"

Vamps jammed both directions of the hall, and Damian sensed Czerno making a beeline for the room behind the wall in front of them.

"Hold 'em, Dusty," Damian shouted and placed his hands on the wall.

"Got it," Dusty said, reloading before his hand cannons began roaring again.

The wall before him burst into dust, and Damian crawled through the opening, firing a full clip at Czerno's form at the other end. The mansion rocked as Dusty's first set of explosions went off. The ceiling began to crumble. A second explosion threw him across the room. Czerno disappeared as chunks of stone ceiling piled in front of the doorway.

Damian rose, sickened by the sight before him. Sofia lay on the cold steel table, her tears still wet but her eyes open and staring blankly. A tube ran from her neck to the vat of blood on the floor. What had started as a stream of blood had slowed to a few remaining drops. Fury filled him. A stone dropped from the ceiling into the vat, and warm blood splashed over him.

Dusty joined him, drawing a sharp breath at the sight.

"This place is about to come down," he warned. Damian launched forward, snatching the tube and whipping out a knife.

"Cut me," he ordered.

"You know what you're doing?"

"Think I just got me an Oracle," Damian said grimly. He felt Dusty's gaze on him before it went to the still woman.

"This is more permanent than marriage," Dusty said in a hushed tone.

Damian followed his gaze. He felt fear again, an emotion he hated. Every instinct in his body ached to feel Sofia alive. He didn't know if she'd understand-- or forgive him-- for what he was about to do to her. He didn't know if *he* understood what he was doing. But seeing her lifeless on the table made his soul wrench in a way that reminded him of how he'd felt when he found his brother's lifeless body thousands of years ago.

Darian.

"Do it," he ordered. He handed Dusty the knife and pulled off the high-collared vest to expose his throat.

Dusty obeyed and punctured deep into his jugular. Damian shoved the other end of the tube into his neck, releasing his power. He sealed his skin around the tube, forced the flow downward, and placed his hands on her, forcing her body to accept his blood. Dizziness made him lean onto the table, and he loosed his regeneration powers.

Dusty watched in silence. The house was crashing down around them. He couldn't Travel with a dead body; the White God's magic only worked on living things. She needed to have a pulse.

"D!" Dusty shouted as a chunk of stone crushed a stainless steel cabinet.

"C'mon, c'mon," Damian urged, watching for signs of life in the woman. He forced his blood out faster and faster.

"We gotta go!" Dusty yelled, slapping him on the back. "*Now!*"

He felt the flicker of a pulse and prayed it was enough. Damian carefully gathered the woman into his arms and closed his eyes. Dizziness washed over him, and he his body strained to Travel. Silence, and he opened his eyes to find himself kneeling on the NOVA Sector's kitchen floor. Her eyes were closed, but color bloomed in her cheeks.

"D, put her down. Laney, get the defib!" Dusty barked.

Damian ordered his body to cease the transfusion and pulled the tube from his neck, healing the tear. He gently removed the tube from the Oracle and placed his hand over the wound to heal it. He touched her face, exhausted for the first time in years. He leaned against the cabinets behind him.

"Move, D," Dusty ordered, snatching the defibrillator from Laney. He cut her shirt open while it charged and placed the paddles against her chest. Her body bucked, and her eyes flew open. The Oracle gasped.

Dusty felt for her pulse before resting against the cabinets opposite him. Damian met his gaze, and they sat in the kitchen, bloodied and breathing hard as they recovered.

"Jule's gonna be pissed we didn't invite him," Dusty said at last and pulled off his gloves, tossing them.

"He would've tried to talk us out of it anyway," Damian said. "He's not as violent as we are."

"I think you mean not as violent as I am. He gives me shit all the time," Dusty corrected him. "Congrats, *ikir*. You are the proud owner of an Oracle. You figure out how to train one?"

"No fucking clue," Damian admitted with a ruthless grin.

"May the gods help you. I sure can't."

"What is she?" Laney asked, returning to the kitchen. Damian rose and pulled Dusty to his feet.

"That, Laney, is my Oracle," he said. "Watch her for a bit while we go back and clean up what's left of Czerno's goons."

Laney's eyebrows shot up, and he looked at the unconscious, blood-spattered woman.

"Yes, *ikir*," he murmured and knelt, lifting Sofia off the ground. "I'll take care of her."

* * *

She stared at the sunbeams moving across the ceiling, not remembering where she was or how she arrived. Her memories wiggled their way out of the mud of her mind, and she sat upright. She was alive! She touched her face, her arms, her body. At the memory of the pain, she began to shake.

It's over!

Yet the sensation of fire creeping through her remained. She suddenly realized the curtains were open, and the sun streaming into her window didn't hurt her eyes. Her memories overshadowed, she threw open the curtains. She shoved the cracked balcony door all the way open. She bathed in the midmorning sun. Morning air had never tasted so wonderful! She didn't have to wear sunglasses indoors anymore, didn't have to hide from moonlight!

"You look good."

She whirled, heart leaping at the sound. Han sat in the corner of her room nearest the door.

"I can go outside!" she exclaimed. "I'm cured!"

"More or less," he said. She looked again at the sunlit courtyard beyond her window.

"I'm *here* again," she murmured, troubled, and faced Han. "I'm ... transformed?"

Han nodded grimly.

"Isn't that good?" she prodded. "Isn't it what you all wanted?"

"It is," he confirmed.

"You don't look happy."

"It all turned out well, I guess," he said at last. "As long as you're okay?"

"I am. I can go outside again." She sat to pull on shoes and saw the scars around her wrists, evidence of her fight against the bindings Jilian used to strap her onto the table. "Han, what happened to me?"

"It's better you don't remember."

"I *do* remember. At least, part of it I remember. Jilian injected me with something to kill me," she paused, shuddering at the flash of residual pain from the memories. "Did he succeed?"

"Yes."

"So I died?"

"You did."

"What happened then?" Her eyes closed at the bizarre news. How many people lived to hear they'd died?

"Ask Damian."

She shuddered, afraid to face him after ditching him as she had before. No doubt he'd had to do some terrible things to free her from Czerno.

"Is Jilian dead?"

"Damn straight."

"I told him so," she said softly, disturbed. "Is Damian okay?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you upset?"

"We lost Jake." Jake's death flashed through her thoughts.

"Jilian killed him," she said.

"Yes."

Because of me. Sofia slumped. As much as Jake annoyed her, he was still her friend. And he'd brought her somewhere where she could be safe.

"Han, can I be alone?"

He complied. Sofia crawled into bed and cried again. She'd not only seen his death-- she'd *caused* it! Her heart ached for her friend. She cried until she was too tired to cry more and drifted into a vision, reliving the few moments she spent with Jilian.

You must die first.

... an Oracle must be bound ...

for all eternity ...

She jerked out of the memory with a cry. Han slammed the door open, and she squeezed her eyes closed, expecting the light from the hallway to hurt her. When it didn't, she uncurled herself from the ball she was in. Han's gaze swept over her before he retreated outside her door.

It was dark outside. She'd wasted her first day of light. She forced herself out of bed, exhausted and hungry. She took a shower and padded through the quiet mansion to the kitchen.

"At least I don't crave peanut butter anymore," she murmured as she went through the contents of the fridge.

In fact, she didn't crave *anything* anymore. Her stomach grumbled but the thought of a ham sandwich disgusted her. She made one anyway and forced herself to eat it, blaming her recent

trauma for her queasiness. Five minutes later, she bent over a toilet, paying homage to the porcelain gods.

"My God!" she gargled between bouts of heaving.

Han watched, handing her a wet wash cloth when she was done.

"Han!" she wailed. "What's wrong with me?"

"Ask Damian."

"I knew you'd say that," she muttered.

Though nauseated by the thought, she heated up a can of soup and forced herself to eat it. The soothing warmth slid down her throat. Five minutes later, it returned, scorching her throat on the way out. She wiped her mouth again and flung the rag against the wall, chest heaving.

"Han, please," she begged. "What can I eat?"

"Damian's in his room. Go see him," Han said, concerned yet unyielding.

"Does he have food?"

"More or less."

"It better be a feast," she growled and stood. She returned to her room to clean herself up, cursing peanut butter for ruining her appetite as she went. A sense of dread filled her as she approached Damian's room. Han hung back, and she turned to him as she knocked.

"Are you coming?"

"Hell no."

"Why not?" If Damian hadn't opened the door, she would have run back to her room. Han was as big as the man before her, and if he feared him ...

Damian's gaze swept over her. A burst of need washed over her as her body responded to his scent.

"Are you well?" he asked with a brusqueness that caught her off guard. His face was guarded. She swallowed hard and nodded, struggling to control the strange sense of desire bubbling uncontrolled within her.

"Han said I should see you," she said. At his long look, she backed away from the door. "I'll come back later."

He threw open the door and walked away. She hesitated, sensing that entering his domain would somehow seal her to a fate she didn't yet understand.

I owe it to Jake.

Damian turned down the stereo blasting trance music and faced her, crossing his arms as she closed the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said again, unable to see his face in the shadows of the dimly lit room.

"It's fine."

"Damian, I'm so sorry about Jake," she said, voice cracking and fading into a whisper. "He's been my friend for almost t...ten years. I'm so sorry."

He emerged from his defensive position, pausing near her. She wiped her eyes.

"I saw what Jilian did to him and what you did to Jilian. I saw what Jilian did to everyone, and Czerno ..." She closed her eyes. Damian rested his hands on her shoulders. The images left. "I didn't know there were such people in this world."

"They're not people," he told her. "Jake's death is not your fault."

"But it is. If I stayed here, he wouldn't have come to save me and died."

"Jake was a warrior, one of my loyal Guardians. I mourn him, but he died doing what he was trained to do. No warrior wants to die of old age," he said.

"He deserved better."

"You've been dropped into the middle of a war no human knows about. Men like Jake wouldn't want to die any other way than honorably defending people like you."

He touched her face, and her mouth went dry. Not trusting herself, she refused to look at him and instead wrapped her arms around him. He hesitated before hugging her. Engulfed in his heat and scent, she relaxed. He felt like home. No, better. He felt like a piece of heaven!

Her stomach grumbled loudly again.

"You're hungry," he said, withdrawing.

"I'll get something later," she said, surprised when he retreated across the room again. "Is everything okay?"

"Wonderful," was the sarcastic response. Confused by his moods, she watched him cross to a thick goblet with a knife beside it.

"I'll go now."

"You are about to confront your new reality," he said. His tone made her back toward the door. "C'mere."

She shook her head, fear spiraling through her.

"Sofia, what's done can't be undone, even if you want it so."

"You're scaring me."

"I told you I'd never hurt you," he said in a softer tone.

"I'm not feeling reassured right now!" she retorted.

He left the corner and approached her, stopping when she took a step back. He held out his hand.

"C'mere," he said more gently. "I promise not to harm you."

She hung in indecision for a long moment until she recalled that being in his arms was the only place she ever found peace. She placed her hand in his. He tugged her forward until their bodies met. Her blood surged with desire, her breathing quickening. She stared at his chest, afraid again to look up.

"Jilian killed you," he said, wrapping his arms around her in a secure hug.

"He said he was going to drain all my blood out." She leaned into him, at peace yet hyped up on adrenaline and desire.

"And he did. I brought you back."

"How?"

"With my blood. My blood runs through your veins. You need it to live."

"Of course I need blood to live," she said with a nervous laugh.

"It's the deepest bond my ... our kind can share and one that Czerno had in store for you."

You must die first.

... an Oracle must be bound ...

for all eternity ...

"You will never hunger for food nor thirst for water. I think you found out what eating does to you?"

She said nothing, her heart somersaulting.

"It's also a bond that folks in my position have to be careful about taking on, because it leaves me vulnerable. That can be an issue when you don't know how to fight. You make an easy target."

"Yes, I can see that," she agreed. "Are you going to teach me to fight?"

"Maybe. We have to get through this first."

She didn't want to ask but did. "Through what?"

His grip tightened around her, and she resisted the urge to push him away and flee. He pulled the knife from his pocket, flipped it inward, and sliced into the tender flesh of his wrist.

Horror and hunger surged through her. The scent of his blood was more intoxicating than a shitload of vodka on a Friday night. She craved him in a way that nearly crippled her.

"Oh God!" she whispered raggedly. "No! No, no, no!"

"You have no choice," he said with calmness that terrified her. "You'll die without it."

"Let me go!" She shoved against him as hard as she could, knowing when he released her it was because he wanted to. She tore out of his room, the scent of his blood ensnared in her senses.

She ran from the mansion into the gardens and toward the forest. Too weak to continue, she dropped to her knees. Her scream was one of fury and frustration. She screamed until she was hoarse, shaking in the chilled air.

"I guess he told you," Han said and squatted beside her. "You know, to our kind, it's an honor to be blood bound to someone like him."

It should have been her instead of Jake! Damian's words swirled through her thoughts, along with the scent of his blood. The thought of drinking from him made her sick, and she pushed herself up to vomit.

"I want to die, Han," she cried. "I can't live like this! I'm a monster!"

"You have no idea what he went through to save you. Because of him, you're alive, and you still have a soul. If he didn't bind you, you'd be bound to Czerno, and then you'd *really* want to kill yourself," he said. "You're bound to our king, our god, our master. If anyone else saw you refuse him, they'd kill you for disrespecting him."

"I'm human, Han," she argued.

"Not anymore. You're one of us now."

"I won't do it," she swore. She threw up again, sick and weak.

"You have no choice, *ikira*."

What's done can't be undone. She wept, not objecting when Han deftly lifted her and carried her back to her room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My name is Darian. Help me. The man in her head just wouldn't leave her alone. She spent the better half of the next day too depressed to leave her bed before forcing herself up and parking on the patio in the sun, determined not to waste another day in the dark. Darian-- whoever he was-- would drive her crazy if she didn't find a way to distract her thoughts. Han stayed with her, not moving until two Guardians-- a raven-haired man with a quick smile and a brooding blond-- approached. He stood and shook hands with both of them.

"The winter's better here than Europe, I imagine," he said with a smile. "This is *Ikira* Sofia."

"*Ikira*, I'm honored," the dark-haired man said with a bow and a thick Spanish accent. "I'm Grande."

"That would be a description of his ego and nothing else," the brooding blond said with a light French accent. "I'm Pierre, *ikira*."

"Boring," Grande said. "He skipped the class on good *nom de plumes*."

Pierre gave him a sidelong look at his butchered French, and Sofia smiled despite herself.

"Grande and Pierre are joining us from our European front. We rotate every twelve months or so," Han explained.

"Front? Like war front?" she asked.

"Fighting Czerno and his monsters."

"*Ikira*, welcome," Grande said.

"Thanks. Call me Sofia."

"No," Han said, leveling a look on them both. "Dusty's a stickler for titles."

"*Mi corazón*," Grande said, faking a wounded look. Pierre punched him in the shoulder, and they walked toward the garage.

"What is *ikira*?" she asked, turning to Han.

"Similar to 'my queen.' You rank up near Damian now."

Her smile faded. The mention of him reminded her of her cramped stomach and the half dozen failed attempts to eat normal food.

"It's a good thing," Han said at her silence. "He owns your ass. No one will mess with you."

"Great," she muttered.

"I bet you won't make it another day and a half," he said.

"We'll see. Let me ask you something, Han," she said, facing him. "What am I supposed to be doing? If I'm not a financial planner, should I be oracl-ing or something?"

"Ask your master."

"I knew you'd say that. And he's not *my* master. I'm an American; we don't have masters."

"I will give you a piece of advice," he said, unaffected by her tirade. "Don't wait until tomorrow to go to him or you'll crawl to him on your knees. No matter what you think, you can't live without his blood. You might as well make it on your terms, ordering him to submit, rather than begging and mauling him like an animal."

"Wow," she murmured. "You really want to win this bet, don't you?"

"You're too smart to be so damn stubborn. Jake lost his life saving you, Sofia, and you're acting like a fucking two-year-old." And he walked away. Sofia watched him, stunned by his rebuke. Her thoughts went to Jake, and she saddened. He was right. He was always right, even when he told her to ask Damian something he knew very well.

On her terms. If she had it her way, she'd not do it at all. She'd never known hunger like this!

"It's your fate," she reminded herself.

How silly was an Oracle who refused her own destiny? If for no other reason, she owed it to Jake to try. She drew a deep breath and marched into the mansion. Damian was rarely indoors during the day, and she hoped he wasn't in his room when she knocked. Her courage fled to see him framed in his doorway, as seductive by day as he was by night.

He didn't ask her why she came but stepped aside and motioned her in. Sofia balled her fists and entered, sweating at the thought of the ordeal ahead.

"I feel like some sort of animal," she told him. *But I want to live.* "I'm scared, Damian."

"I know," he said, holding out a hand to her.

She took it, her insides quaking in anticipation and hunger. He sat her down on the couch and sat down across from her with the knife in hand. She closed her eyes, more of his home videos playing through her mind.

"Stop," he warned.

She opened her eyes. A flash of darkness went through his gaze, and the same sense of hidden fury returned.

"You hate this."

"I do, but not because of you," he said.

"Someone hurt you? Was this during your dark period?"

"It was," he confirmed between clenched teeth.

She took the hint but wondered who had hurt him so badly that he still bore a grudge thousands of years later. He sliced his wrist, and her attention turned immediately to thick liquid bubbling against his olive skin.

This isn't right.

You'll die without it.

She recoiled, pushing herself against the couch. He sat beside her, stroking her hair with one hand.

"You won't hurt me," he assured her.

She refused to move. He shifted his hand to her neck and held her in place, placing his bloodied wrist against her lips.

The scent, the taste, was unlike anything she ever experienced. Sofia licked her lips, the rich flavor as ensnaring as his scent. She lapped once with the tip of her tongue, tasting both the metallic, spicy blood and her tears. She opened her mouth and drank from him, timidly at first

then hungrily. Damian hissed beside her, his grip on her neck tightening. She withdrew, afraid to hurt him.

"Don't stop," he urged, his voice huskier, lower. "Drink."

She closed her eyes and drank. When she pulled back at last, she sat in a daze, fulfilled and content yet unable to shake the horror of what she'd done. Damian had turned his face away and was clenching a thick knuckle between his teeth.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, appalled.

"No," he grated. "Are you done?"

"Yes."

"You better go." Something in his voice compelled her to hurry. Sofia fled to her room, amazed at how good she felt. She was no longer hungry, and she felt energized, fulfilled.

Guilty.

How long could she live like this, drinking someone else's blood?

It was still sooooo wrong!

She tried to sift through her emotions before she returned to his door. He opened it before she knocked, dressed for sparring in his judo pants and nothing else. It took every ounce of her willpower to keep from devouring his body with her eyes.

"I wanted to make sure you're okay," she said. "And ... I'm okay, right?"

"We're cool," he said, pushing himself away from the doorframe. "Whenever you're hungry, you can come by."

He was guarded again. She felt like the morning after a drunk, one night stand. What did she say after the most awkward experience of her life? The thought of his blood lit her afire, almost as much as the sight of his bare chest.

What would sleeping with him while drinking from him be like? She backed away from his door, wondering how that deviant thought emerged. Han eyed her as she hurried past him toward the library. Dressed for sparring, he waited with Grande and Pierre for Damian.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"You always ask me that. If I'm not, you'll know," she replied curtly.

"Very well, *ikira*."

She glared at him, sensing his amusement. Damian trotted down the stairs. She didn't look at him until his back was to her on their way toward the door. As if feeling her gaze on him, he paused at the door.

"If you ever want to try it, let me know."

"Try what? Sparring?"

Screwing and drinking. His voice was as clear in her mind as if he spoke the words. She sucked in a sharp breath, at once confused and thrilled. Without looking at her, he strode through the doors into the courtyard.

"I do *not* understand you," she whispered after him. His simple words turned her inside out, and yet, what would *he* want with a woman like her? If he was what Han claimed-- king, lord, master of the entire damn universe-- wouldn't he take the supermodel of his choice?

Target of opportunity. Maybe that's all she was.

She shook her head. If she was an Oracle, she needed to learn to be one. She retreated to the study and began to search the shelves for books on Oracles. Many of the books looked ancient, with some written in different languages. One volume, *Oracle, See Thyself Home*, caught her attention.

She collected what she could find and perched in a chair, reading until sundown, when the hunger pangs hit her again. They were always worse at night, when Damian's draw was overwhelming. The thought of him without his shirt on, or better yet, naked ...

"No way in hell," she breathed.

She gritted her teeth and forced her attention to the stack of books, jotting down notes on her notepad. There appeared to be no such thing as a do-it-yourself manual for seeing the

future, but the books had a few good-- if bizarre-- anecdotal stories that gave her ideas. Armed with her notes, she emerged from the library.

The mansion was quiet, and she roamed until she found where everyone was. The men were at dinner, including Damian. The scents of what looked like pizza night taunted her, and she stood peering through the cracked door at the long dinner table.

Bitterness slithered through her.

She was even different from *them*. Her reading had shed some insight, saying that when an Oracle died, she could be brought back to life by a blood bond. There weren't many details, and she could only guess that this was not the normal case, as some stories mentioned Oracles attending great feasts.

She watched the men eating happily around the table and left the mansion for the gardens. A cold wind comforted her as she sat alone. The moon was covered by clouds, and she crumpled the notes she'd taken. Tears began to spill again, and she began to understand how Darian felt, utterly alone and abandoned in the corner of her mind.

"You should go inside." Damian's voice was soft. She didn't hear him approach.

"I don't belong there. I don't belong anywhere."

"You belong here," he said resolutely. "You were forced into a transition without being prepared for it. I'm sorry for that."

"But are you sorry for what I am?"

"Not at all." He pried the notes from her hand. "What is this?"

"I'm trying to learn to be an Oracle. I read a couple of books today."

He studied what she had written.

"There's no dummies guide," she added. "I think I can teach myself how to keep from seeing deaths whenever I touch someone." She sneaked a look at his face, surprised to see the warm smile there as he read through her notes.

"Have you tried any of this?" he asked.

"No."

"Try it."

She took it back. She wanted to reach out to him, but she was ashamed even to look at him. Would he soon grow tired of her showing up at his door, demanding a meal?

"I don't want to use you," she voiced out loud.

"Pardon?"

"I don't want to use you for ... for your blood. I don't like being dependent on anyone. It'll get old for you one day."

"It won't."

"How could it not? It's just the way things are," she insisted. "I'm an addict. You're the supplier. What if you get a new job someday and stop selling drugs?"

"I never thought of it that way," he admitted, chuckling. "I am what I am, and you are what you are. I don't second-guess that."

"I'm not as confident as you. My existence relies on you giving me blood. Sometimes I think you'd rather eat me than talk to me." She hugged herself and faced him, agitated. "I don't like being hungry and not being able to go to the kitchen."

"I understand."

By the reserved note in his voice, he did. If she closed her eyes, she would see the black memories crossing through his mind, but she allowed him his privacy.

"I will never make you beg or deny you what you need," he said, gaze dark. "If you're hungry, visit the kitchen. I won't say no."

"I don't want this."

"It's not your choice. You must learn to trust me."

Trust! She almost laughed. Kidnapping, involuntary resurrection-- these were not the foundations on which trust was built!

* * *

Damian held out his hand to her. She hesitated while her silver eyes swirled with hypnotic slowness. His terrified, brave little Oracle was entrancing, the shimmer that caught his attention when they met much stronger with their bond.

She was *trying*. He never thought something so simple could please him so much. He couldn't flush away the dark memories from his time after the Schism when he'd been enslaved by humans intent on using his god-powers, but he could protect her from a similar fate. She moved forward, taking refuge from him in his own arms, a reality that amused him.

"Damian, I'm a monster, even in your world." Her heartbreak was in her voice, and he squeezed her closer to him. He didn't think he'd ever met a human or Guardian as honest as this one.

"At least you're a cute monster," he replied.

She pulled away, her anger rippling through him. He didn't know how something so innocuous could piss her off, but then again, thousands of years hadn't given him much insight into a woman's mind.

"You're a jerk, Damian!" she said, glaring at him before running away.

"You better run, woman," he growled, irritated by her response.

His gaze followed her until she disappeared into the house, and he shook his head. He let her get away with so much! She had *no* idea how his world operated! He didn't understand the ins and outs of their blood bond, but he knew how much she rocked his world when she drank from him earlier.

In a different time, he'd simply command her to take her place at his side and in his bed as his mate and slake his heated blood whenever he felt the need. The ancient kings-- his father and brother included-- had regularly taken Oracles as their queens. He began to understand why and couldn't help but feel frustrated at having to find a way to *win* her instead of command her.

His phone dinged, and he pulled it out to see the odd text message.

Ikir, may I enter your home?

He gazed at the message, puzzled, before he realized who it was and typed a response.

At your risk, Watcher.

"I knocked this time, *ikir*."

He turned to see the small man with bright green eyes that glowed in the moonlight. Damian crossed his arms and leaned against the wall around the trickling fountain at his back.

"I admit, this technology makes it much easier for me to communicate," the Watcher said, gazing at his phone.

Damian raised an eyebrow, not about to humor the otherworldly harbinger of bad news.

"I hope you don't spend enough time here to learn to use too much technology," he said pointedly. "What's up, Watcher?"

"The Grey God is coming."

"The *what*?"

"I had to wait until you found your Oracle to tell you. I do apologize," the Watcher said. "If you hadn't found her, he wouldn't come. But now he will."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"To contain the, uh, coaching being done, the Original Beings are ordaining a new god to act as a sort of referee here on earth who will have the ability to bridge the physical and divine worlds."

"Y'all really pissed them off this time, didn't you?" Damian said.

"Yes, *ikir*, I think we did."

"What is this Grey God?"

"I can't tell you, but you must be on the lookout for him. You have to protect him," the Watcher said.

"Didn't your Original friends give him god-powers?"

"It's hard to explain." Damian waited. The Watcher returned his gaze to his phone, reading a text. "Fascinating."

"You gonna try to explain?" Damian prompted.

"No, *ikir*."

He studied the small man infatuated with his phone. He'd hoped never to see the Watcher again.

"I've assigned you a ringtone," the Watcher said in satisfaction.

"Didn't think you Watchers liked us lesser beings contacting you."

"In an emergency."

"Is that your way of saying something bad's gonna happen, and I'll need to call you?"

"No, *ikir*," the Watcher said, looking up. "But in case it does ..."

"Right," Damian said, not amused by the cryptic responses.

"Will you tell your team captains I may visit them?"

Despite his suspicion, Damian chuckled. "You can stop with the basketball analogies. You mean Dusty and Jule?"

"My apologies, *ikir*. I wanted to explain things to you in a way you'd be able to understand."

"Yeah, we're all idiots here on planet earth."

The Watcher smiled in response, and Damian knew well enough his kind truly thought themselves superior.

"I'll tell them not to kill you on sight, if that's what you're asking," Damian continued. "But I'll warn you as well: if you speak in riddles to Dusty, he'll cut your heart out. And Jule may smile at you, but you better disappear fast if you tell him something he doesn't like."

"I understand," the Watcher said. "I want only the opportunity to speak to Dusty, if needed. Jule's still on what you might call the otherworldly shit list."

Damian straightened, at his limit with the cryptic nonsense. "Anything else you wanna avoid telling me?"

"No, *ikir*."

"Walk yourself out." He strode away. He felt the Watcher's presence disappear as he entered the mansion. His phone dinged again, and he glanced down.

Thank u, ikir.

"Just when things were complicated enough," he muttered and retreated to his study for his evening telecon with Dusty and Jule.

They were both online already, swapping vamp stats.

"Dusty, do I need to send someone to Miami to fix your IT?" he asked as a message popped upon his screen.

"You know he's a techno-phobe," Jule said. "Still using stamps and envelopes."

I prefer the personal touch to this e-shit, Dusty typed.

"Hey, there's something I need to tell you guys," Damian said grimly. "The Watchers are in town, and they may be dropping by to visit."

There was a pause in activity before Dusty's *Uh-oh*.

"You have no idea," Damian said. "We'll talk when you're in town. Whatcha got for me tonight?"

* * *

"Okay, *ikira*, what do you See?"

She tentatively touched Pierre's outstretched arm. He took his place on the sparring field, and Grande leaned close to her.

"He'll win in seven moves," she told him.

"Pierre for the kill," Grande said, handing Han one from the wad of dollars in his hand.

"This is working too well," Han said, eyeing her.

"If only you could touch horses," Grande said with a sigh of exaggerated melancholy. "We'd be kings at the races."

She was getting a better grip on her newfound talent and was now able to predict the winner of their rounds-- without flashes of their deaths. Han motioned him away, and Grande shifted down a seat.

"Isn't there a better use for your gift than lining Grande's pockets?" he asked.

"I asked you the other day, and you weren't at all helpful," she reminded him. "If you have any ideas, let me know." Her stomach growled loudly. She ignored Han's knowing look.

"I win again!" Grande exclaimed as Pierre's opponent went down. "*Dos dolares, señor.*"

"Enough," Han said. "No more bets with *ikira*. It's called cheating in the real world."

"You have any other magic tricks for us?" Pierre called to her.

"Not today."

"Magic tricks," Han muttered. "In my day, Oracles were the most revered, most feared and celebrated. This generation has no idea. Including you, *ikira*. You're all fucking idiots."

"You're no fun today, Han. What gives?" Sofia said, surprised. He grimaced in response. She touched his arm. "You're leaving me," she said, saddening. "Why?"

"Battle is what we do," he answered then looked at her. "What did you see?"

Damian's rules for Oracles returned to her.

"You'll live," she said. *After your leg is broken next week.*

He appeared relieved, and she felt guilty. And hungry. Always hungry. She chewed her lip and glanced at her own wrist. Did her blood taste half as good as Damian's? She made a face, drooling at the thought of Damian's blood again.

"I guess I'm done here," she said and rose.

She placed a checkmark next to the first of her ideas for learning to use her power. She wandered the mansion as she often did, restless and starving. She found herself again in front of Damian's door. She'd been there twice before today and only knocked once for fear he'd answer. And then she'd tried to eat chocolate and ended up in the bathroom even weaker and hungrier.

I don't want this! Her stomach growled. Angry, she turned to leave when Damian's door opened. He was dressed again all in black, a color that should have minimized his size but just amplified how ripped he was beneath the clothing.

"You need something?" he asked with a casualness that pissed her off, as if he didn't know why she was there.

"No."

"Alrighty then." He closed his door. He was messing with her-- he knew she was hungry!

He promised! She sighed and knocked. He answered.

"You need something?"

"Yes," she grated. "I do."

He pushed the door open. She entered and saw car keys on the table near the door.

"Are you going to town?"

"Yep."

Bet he's got a girl in town.

"Figures," she muttered.

"Pardon?" he asked, looking up from the wallet he rifled through.

"Nothing."

"You finish your thoughts out loud pretty often."

"Bad habit," she said.

Maybe I do, he said into her mind.

"*That* is not cool," she told him.

"The girl or the ability to read minds?"

She gritted her teeth and turned to go, trying not to think of how jealous the idea of another woman made her.

"There's no girl," he called after her. "You can stay."

"I wasn't-- "

"Yes, you were. Sit down."

He was amused and she fumed, her emotions scattered by his mere presence.

I have no right to be jealous. If he has a woman, he has a woman.

"Sofia, stop thinking and sit down." She obeyed, embarrassed. "There's no woman, though I'm flattered."

He sat beside her on the couch. The sight of the knife in her hand still made her squeamish.

"I keep trying to entice you, but you seem immune to me," he teased. "No other woman has been able to resist me. It's fascinating."

"I appreciate you trying to make me feel less nervous, but you shouldn't lie to me," she snapped.

"I can have any woman I want. I wouldn't bother with you if I didn't want you."

The edge of arrogance surprised her. She looked at him. His look was intent, the gold of his irises swirling.

"Let's get this over with, so you don't miss your hot date," she said coolly.

He lifted her chin with one finger. His lips brushed hers, and she felt something within her melt at the simple touch. Hunger for him-- not just his blood-- roared through her. He kissed her gently, tasting her, savoring her. At his prodding, she opened her mouth. His mouth was hot, his flavor as addictive as his blood. He nipped at her lips, his tongue darting in and out of her mouth. He pressed her back against the couch, and she yielded, her hands touching his face, his soft hair, his neck. Touching him sent warm energy racing through her blood. Maybe he had a harem of women at his beck and call, but she couldn't see herself with any other man. Ever.

"You believe me now?" he whispered against her lips, pulling away.

She sighed in response.

"The offer's always open," he assured her. "Now drink."

He placed his bloodied wrist to her mouth. She closed her eyes, body on fire as she drank from him while imagining what his mouth could do to the rest of her body. When she was sated, she pushed his arm away. He had turned away again and was chewing his knuckle.

"Why do you do that?" she asked, embarrassed when her voice came out husky. "Are you in pain?"

"Not the kind you'd understand."

"What do you mean not the kind I'd understand?" she persisted, standing. "I don't want to hurt you, Damian."

His eyes were closed. He gave a husky laugh at her words. "I mean, when you do that, I want to fuck you, and if you don't leave like, NOW, I'm gonna drag you into my bed and-- "

She ran before he finished, emotions roiling and high off the kiss and his blood. Though she couldn't see her own fate, she began to suspect which direction it'd take her in.

"Any day now!" he shouted as he passed her room to leave.

* * *

She stood in a dark, cold place, gazing at the hunched form in the corner. She couldn't tell if he was human or beast. While afraid, she knew whatever he was, he needed help. Her help.

Darian stirred, pushing himself farther into the corner. She approached and knelt a safe distance from him, trying hard to see into the darkness of the corner. She couldn't make him out.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered.

"Free me."

While his form was large enough to be a man the size of Damian's Guardians, his voice was terrified and gravelly, as if he hadn't ever spoken to anyone.

"Are you okay?" she asked, creeping forward.

He began to cry, the soul-deep weeping of a man who'd lost all and spent his tormented life in a level of hell she'd never be able to imagine. The sound made her gut twist and her chest tighten. Tears formed in her eyes at the heartbreaking sound of his pain. She moved closer and held out her hand. He reached for her, but his scarred hand passed through hers, as if all that remained of him was a ghost of the man he'd been. She made out the shape of the bottom of a tattoo on his bicep, what looked like a half-sun. The rest was shrouded in darkness.

Darian wouldn't leave her alone. The scene played over and over in her thoughts, growing stronger until he was as vivid during daylight as he had been at night. She rubbed her temples and issued a challenging glare to the contents of the pantry, furious once more she could eat none of the wonderful things it held.

"Gods. She does this a few times a day. She can't eat food, but she refuses to admit it to herself," Han explained to Pierre. "Since you'll be her new-- "

"Babysitter," she interjected.

"Exactly. You'll be holding her hair for her in the bathroom several times a day."

"She cannot eat?" Pierre asked with a frown.

"No. She's blood bound."

Pierre's look turned from disappointed to approving.

"*Bien.*"

"I want real food," Sofia said with a sigh. Damian hadn't returned the night before after their last interaction. She wondered again whether or not he had a harem elsewhere. That thought coupled with her nightmare made her even angrier at not being able to eat.

"Go eat," Han grumbled.

"No."

"Fine. Let him sleep. He had a rough night anyway. I know you're mad at him and thought you'd like to pester him."

"Why was his night rough?"

"He had a run-in with a whole bunch of Czerno's goons."

Concerned, Sofia turned to face him. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine. Cranky."

"Then I definitely don't want to see him," she said, eyes going to the ceiling.

He'll be too sleepy to tempt me. If he doesn't refuse me because he's tired.

He promised.

She returned her gaze to the Pop-Tarts.

"Damn you all," she muttered and closed the pantry.

"Go. Eat."

She didn't acknowledge his order but headed toward the stairs. Her daily debate about drinking blood made her pace in front of Damian's room until he wrenched the door open and stared at her, bleary-eyed and bare-chested.

"Either come in, or go think somewhere else!" he snapped.

"Good morning, sunshine!" she said with false cheerfulness.

He muttered a curse and flung his door open. She smiled, pleased to see him as pissy as she felt. It was his turn to be ticked at the world-- she was sick of being alone and angry. She closed the door behind her.

"Han said you were out doing battle last night," she said, noticing the shredded T-shirt on the floor.

"This world is so fucked up I don't know why I bother." He flung himself back into bed.

Irritated, Sofia pulled open the curtains to his windows overlooking the bed.

"Sofia!" he snarled, burying his head under a pillow.

"You promised," she reminded him, enjoying his misery. "The kitchen is always open."
He flung out an arm.

"I'm not going to cut you," she objected.

"Then you're not going to eat."

"Fine. Your precious Oracle will just starve to death," she snapped and started toward the door.

"Stop!"

She turned to see him pull a knife from under his pillow. He rolled onto his side.

"C'mere."

"Did you win your battle last night?" she asked as unease swept through her again.

"I'm still here, aren't I?"

She waited at the edge of the bed. He sliced his forearm and tucked the knife beneath his pillow once more, closing his eyes.

"Are you going to get up?" she asked.

"No."

The sight of him in bed made her blood surge. His head remained shoved under a pillow, and his body relaxed, as if he were falling back asleep. Turned on and starving, she gingerly crawled across the bed and settled beside him on her belly, pausing guiltily before lapping up the bubbles of blood. She drank until full.

"Thank you, Damian," she whispered and placed a small kiss on his elbow.

His other hand snaked out and rolled her onto her side beside him. He looped one leg across her hips so she couldn't move.

"Damian--" she protested.

"Hush."

The curtains closed at his silent command, and she lay still, waiting for him to make some move on her. He tucked her against him and fell asleep. The sense of peace descended upon her again, and she relaxed against him, content to her soul to be surrounded by his scent and heat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Usually when he awoke with a hard-on and a woman in his bed, what happened next was pretty straightforward. He rolled onto his side, watching her sleep. Her cool beauty turned haunting in the moonlight that slid through the curtains. She lay sweet and vulnerable on her back, her lips parted and warm body tucked against his side. He touched her face and trailed a finger down her neck, between her breasts, and rested his hand on her stomach.

There were many things he *thought* of doing to her. He couldn't risk alienating the woman in his bed, partly because she was still too delicate, too new to his world to take the next step and partly because he was still leery of the powers of an Oracle.

"Damian?" Her voice, thick with sleep, ratcheted up his hormones another level.

"I'm here, *kiri*," he said. He brushed stray hairs from her face and replaced his hand on her stomach. The simple movement took discipline Dusty would be proud of.

"Do you think I'm a monster?"

"No, *kiri*. I think you're a lost angel."

"I know where I am," she said with sleepy stubbornness that made him smile. She roused herself and lay on her side, facing him. His hand shifted to her hip, and he felt the absence of her warmth to the bone. Her eyes glowed and spun. They gazed at each other for a long moment.

"You're always welcome in my bed, *kiri*," he said, satisfied when her pupils dilated and her face reddened. She looked away, embarrassed.

"You shouldn't say those things," she whispered.

"Why not? You're mine already. You just haven't realized it," he said.

She gave him an agitated look and rolled onto her stomach, twisting her head away from him.

"Will you answer something personal, Damian?"

"Shoot."

"What are you? And don't tell me a divine spirit of sorts. That doesn't make sense to me."

He pulled her into his body, even as she refused to look at him. She didn't resist his touch. She never did, and yet she never surrendered either. It was an odd mix that warned him she'd not yet accepted her place in his world.

"My father was the White God, the deity charged with safeguarding good and battling evil on behalf of all the creatures of the universe. My brother inherited the title when he died. I inherited it from him on his death," he started.

"You're a god?"

"Yeah. Cool, isn't it?" He rested against her, enjoying her scent.

"Why are you on earth? Shouldn't you be floating in the sky somewhere?" she asked skeptically.

He chuckled.

"A long time ago, there was a battle so horrible it threatened to destroy the whole universe. There are ... creatures older than me in the universe, and they were fighting a turf war over who ruled what part of the universe. The battle got so bad that the only way to prevent the annihilation of every being in the universe was to divide the physical and divine worlds. The Schism occurred, and some of us were exiled to the physical world-- the human world-- while the rest of my kind and the other creatures were confined to the divine world," he explained. "So, while I am a god, I have to stay here, where I'm preordained to fight Czerno, the Black God, for the fate of humanity."

As he spoke, memories streamed through his mind, memories of the universe before the Schism and afterwards, when he and a few others were cast alone onto earth. He thought again of the Watcher's latest warning, of there being a new god in town.

"Were there many Oracles before the Schism?" she asked.

"Oracles are rare but there was at least one every generation. When the kings of our people found them, they mated with them to bind them to them."

"Instead of blood binding?"

"Depended on the king and the Oracle. I would say it was a rough lesson in history when the kings of my time learned that killing a woman with the intent to bring her back as your servant doesn't really work as they'd planned," he explained.

"If you killed me, I'd make your life hell."

"Exactly."

"Who's Darian?" she asked and pushed herself up enough to look at him. Damian's jaw clenched. When he didn't answer, she continued. "I have dreams about him where he's sad and alone."

"Darian was my brother, Sofia," he said quietly. "He died a long time ago."

He met her gaze and saw her confusion. The tension between them was thick. He knew without touching her mind that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. She cleared her throat and lay down again, facing away from him.

"I'm bound to you forever," she whispered.

"Yep. You're mine."

"Will you ... can you have a mate and an Oracle?"

He considered, smiling to himself. For her sake, he made an effort to behave, but he truly loved the openings she gave him.

"I can," he concurred. "Many times, a king will take an Oracle as his mate. But if you don't stop messing with my weak heart, I'll go elsewhere for a mate."

"You're a jerk."

"I'll say again: you're welcome in my bed, preferably naked, though this is good enough for now, I guess."

"Damian ..." She didn't finish. He understood. She was terrified of what she was, of his world, of him. He was a saint through and through for rubbing her back instead of seducing her. He liked that she needed the comfort only he could provide, trusted him on a level that seemed to him far more intimate than fucking.

Then again, he was a man, and he didn't pretend to understand a woman's mind. *He'd* never lie down in a woman's bed and expect to sleep when they were both horny. It was purely a woman thing.

"You must miss your brother," she said softly.

His thoughts turned dark. He didn't like that she was able to pull those memories free of the prison he'd sent them to. He released a small burst of power into her. She fell into a deep sleep. Damian wrapped his arm around her and held her close for a moment, torn between thoughts of her naked and thoughts of his brother's death.

A light knock at his door distracted him from both painful thoughts. He covered Sofia with a comforter and closed the door to his bedroom behind him.

"Come in," he ordered. The door opened, and he froze.

"Hey, love." Claire was as beautiful as the last time he'd seen her. With red hair, glowing skin, a voluptuous body he'd experienced many times over, and beautiful eyes, she was the epitome of beauty.

"Hello, Claire."

She closed the door behind her, dressed in clothing that accentuated her large breasts and tight body. His blood boiled more at the memories that pricked his mind. She looked at him with a coy smile before approaching. He didn't move, unable to determine if this was a dream or a nightmare. His slain brother's wife had always been a painful sight for him, the reminder of his brother and a happier time before the Schism. She leaned against him, her hand trailing down his chest and settling on his crotch.

"I see you remember the last time we met," she said, desire clouding her gaze. She kissed him, and he responded, his mind on her and Sofia. It would take Sofia awhile before she came to his bed of her own accord. Claire was ready for him *now*.

Her arms slid around him, and he pulled her against him, kissing her hungrily. She gripped his ass the way he liked. He kneaded her breasts, wanting nothing better than to suckle her until she cried out in ecstasy.

Sofia. He pulled back, breathing deeply.

"C'mon, love, I'm wet for you," she purred.

Shit! He wanted to fuck someone, and that someone was sleeping in his bed. There was a time when he didn't care who he slept with, when he was hard at the sight of any woman who would take him to bed.

"I can't, Claire," he said and pushed her away from him.

Surprised, she tried to move toward him. He held her at arm's length, forcing himself out of the cloud of desire tormenting him. He wished Sofia would wake up and intrude. Her presence would bolster his weak will.

"Love," Claire said, "for old time's sake, please."

"Not this time, Claire," he said with resolution. "Things have changed."

* * *

Sofia. The voice awoke her from her deep slumber. Moonlight slid in through the crack between the curtains. The voices were not happy, and she was surprised to hear one of them. It was a woman's.

"...and I've told you no," Damian said. "It ain't happening, sister."

"Why not? We're so good together."

She peeked through the crack in the door to see the voice of the speaker.

Claire. Darian's whisper was tortured. He was silent, as if watching. Sofia rubbed her temples but didn't move, grateful he wasn't hurting her head for once.

The woman was beautiful, tall and shapely with auburn hair and deep blue eyes that made no attempt to hide her interest in the bare-chested man before her. Damian's hair was mussed, his arms crossed.

"How long were we a pair?" the woman continued, tracing a finger lazily down his bicep. "Centuries, no?"

Her accent was exotic and complemented her sexy, sultry voice. Damian crossed to the window.

"Claire, no," he said. "I didn't realize you were rotating *here*, or I'd have blocked it."

"My love, we've been destined for each other since I wed your brother thousands of years ago. We had eyes only for each other then."

"And I learned the hard way. What we had is gone. Long gone."

"We don't need love. I know you want me," Claire said.

At his hesitation and the heated, lustful look he gave her, Sofia's mouth dropped open. He shook his head despite the desire on his face.

"Come, love. We will fight and fuck together. What else is there?" Claire urged. She had a damn good point, Sofia admitted, and hated her for it. Damian's gaze turned to the door to the bedroom, and she ducked back, remembering he could hear her thoughts.

If he made a choice, she wanted it to be the choice he'd make whether or not she was there.

"Not possible," he said.

She didn't know if it was meant for her or the woman sidling up to him. Or both.

"Why not?" Claire purred.

Sofia peeked out. The woman was all over him! Her boobs were pressed against Damian's bare chest, and her hands were on his biceps. Sofia knew she had no right to claim him, especially when she just rejected him less than an hour before. Fuming anyway, she pushed the curtains away from the balcony door and stepped into the night, winter's chill taking some of the heat out of her.

"Stupid men. Always want women with huge boobs and nothing between their ears. *Let's screw, Damian. We're good at it, so why not?*"

What in God's name was wrong with her? Her balcony was several feet from the edge of his. She looked to the bushes several floors down and decided it was worth the risk. Not wanting to be around to hear Claire get her way, Sofia climbed onto the edge of Damian's balcony and stretched upward toward the ledge running around the mansion. She yelped as someone grabbed her hips and pulled her from the edge of the balcony.

"What the hell are you doing?" Damian demanded, lowering her to the ground and spinning her to face him. "Are you *jumping* to your balcony?"

She glared at him in response.

"There's a door. Use it," he snapped.

"I didn't want to interrupt your reunion."

His eyes narrowed. His body was warm against hers, and she resisted the urge to wrap her arms around him.

"God, I'm so stupid!" she growled.

"You're *jealous*?" A smile flickered across his face and turned into a laugh. He hugged her against him.

"No, of course not!" she snapped, pushing at him.

"Woman, you're something else!"

"Damn you, Damian!"

"You're more welcome in my bed than she is!"

A thrill went through her. Embarrassed at the emotions bubbling within her, she pulled away and folded her arms across her chest, marching into the living room. Claire apparently had left.

"It's okay, Damian, really. You can do whatever with Claire. Just put a sock on the doorknob or something so I don't bother you."

"You are very magnanimous to give me permission to do whatever the fuck I want in my own house," he said, borderline pissy once more.

"You're such an ass, Damian!"

"And you're fucking naïve."

Her face flamed red. She marched to the doorway.

"Sofi, wait," Damian called. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm not interested in Claire. I'm interested-- "

She ignored him and slammed the door behind her, returning to her room, angry and agitated. A breeze made her curtains flutter, and she closed it, certain Claire's cries of ecstasy would soon fill the air around the mansion.

Her thoughts returned to the dead man alone in the dark room. She shook out the sexual energy running through her and turned on a light, not wanting to be alone in the dark while the dead man in her thoughts began to sob once more. Like the night before, he wasn't going to let her sleep. She read, paced, and finally just lay down to stare at the ceiling until morning came. The sounds of sparring in the courtyard drew no interest this morning. She waited until they stopped and the full light of day streamed into her room before heading to the kitchen.

A short time later, she sagged against the toilet, ignoring Pierre as he tsked and held her hair. She'd seen Claire in the kitchen and hallway, eating Pop-Tarts, eating chocolate, eating broccoli. So once more, Sofia had tried to eat.

She groaned and held her stomach. Claire could eat! There was no crueler fate in this world than her own!

"Have you tried crackers?" Pierre asked. "Or maybe antidepressants?"

She glared at him.

"We've eliminated every other type of food, and the drugs might help you accept that you cannot eat."

"Bonjour, Pierre."

At Clair's soft voice, Sofia wanted to throw up again.

"What's this?" Claire asked, pausing in the door frame of the bathroom. "Hello, love. I've seen you around a lot the past couple of days. Are you one of the help?"

One of the help?! Sofia bit back a retort and forced herself to her feet. The pain in her stomach was almost crippling. She motioned for Pierre to close the door so she could clean up. When she opened it, Claire gazed at her with a look both guarded and surprised.

"How ... interesting," she said with a forced smile, looking at her in reproach. "My, how things change."

She sashayed away. Sofia looked down at herself. She looked decent in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. She wasn't dressed in skin-tight workout clothes like Claire, who joined Damian as he trotted down the stairs for their daily sparring session. Of course, she wasn't nearly as smokin' hot as Claire either. Claire greeted him with a kiss on his cheek and a look so smoldering it made Sofia blush. Damian glanced at the redhead and touched her arm in affectionate greeting.

Sofia drank another glass of water and forced her attention to her list. She had checked off three of the seven exercises she'd learned from the books she read. She was so fatigued, she hurt everywhere.

“Pierre, I’m going to lie down. I’ve lost my will to live today.”

“Very well, *ikira*,” he said with his usual stoicism. “If you decide to live, let me know.”

“I will.”

He followed the group to the courtyard to spar. Nearly doubled over in pain, Sofia returned to her room. She clutched her stomach as pain pierced her concentration. Darian was crying, and her head hurt.

“Pierre *recommended* I see you. You are so damn stubborn,” Damian snapped, pushing her door open. “What’s the purpose of starving yourself? Jealousy?”

He closed the door and moved the laptop Pierre had brought her to supplement her Oracle research. He sat on the bed beside her and pushed her onto her back. She strained, but he planted one heavy hand on her chest.

“I’m not sleeping with her, Sofia,” he said and sliced his wrist.

The scent of his blood overwhelmed any objection she could make, and she snatched his arm. She drank heavily and opened her eyes, surprised to see his eyes open and the gold swirling within them. The tick in his jaw belied how tightly his teeth were clamped.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“And?”

“And what?”

“I said I’m not sleeping with her,” he repeated.

“Good for you.”

“Stubborn, infuriating woman.”

“I’m not jealous.” She gazed at him, completely aroused and angry at the same time.

“Bullshit,” he replied.

She rolled onto her stomach away from him, blood flying with desire and heat.

“Gods, woman. In a different time,” he muttered then swore. “When the common sense fairy smacks you upside the head, you know where to find me.”

He left, as pissed as she was. She sighed. It was getting harder and harder to deny what she felt toward him. In the long silence that followed, she heard Darian’s sobs. She held her head in her hands, tormented by his pain without understanding how she was supposed to help a dead man.

“Please stop,” she whispered, wondering if Oracles could go crazy, too.

Unable to be alone with the man in her head, she went to her library. Pierre returned a couple of hours later as she checked off the fourth box on her list of Oracle self-training. He smelled of soap, and his hair was wet.

“You know, the French are the kings and queens of love,” he said and sat in his chair by the door. “I can help you.”

“That’s the last thing I need.”

“You would be more pleasant if you fucked him every once in awhile.”

“Wow, Pierre, that’s the most inappropriate thing I’ve ever heard,” she retorted.

“Forgive me, *ikira*.” By his tone, he didn’t give a damn what she thought. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. We Europeans enjoy a more liberal form of commitment than you Americans.”

“You sleep around,” she surmised. “I don’t think all of Europe does that. Just you maybe.”

“Yes, and it’s very relaxing.”

“I don’t want to sleep with a bunch of men.”

“*You* wouldn’t be permitted that freedom, *ikira*,” he almost scoffed. “But you have one man you can sleep around with.”

“He wants Claire and probably has a private brothel in town. Pierre, I’m some sort of resurrected monster killed by a psychopath. I can’t even eat real food,” she said bitterly. “The last thing I need is to complicate things more.”

“It’s not that bad. Claire?” he tsked. “I would not sleep with her. Damaged goods.”

"Pierre, you can sleep with whomever you want, really."

"I know. Why do you not ask him?"

"To sleep with me?" she asked.

"*Oui.*"

Because he would agree. She mulled his proposition and forced her thoughts away from it and her gaze to the paper again.

5. *Test ability to control skill on new target.* There was one person she wanted to know more about.

"Do you know where Claire is?" she asked.

"*Oui.*"

"Let's go."

He led her from the library, across the courtyard, and into the far wing of the mansion she'd not yet explored. It was a barracks for the Guardians, most of whom greeted her with a quiet *good day, ikira* as she passed. The wing housed an indoor basketball court, indoor pool, a small game room, and a huge theatre room where music blared from some action movie. Claire sat beside another Guardian, watching the movie. Sofia didn't have time to plot how to approach her.

"Claire," Pierre said, stooping to kiss her cheek.

"*Bonjour, mon amour,*" she purred in response.

"*Ikira* wanted to meet you."

Claire rose, the smile freezing on her face as she faced Sofia. Sofia forced her own smile, noticing how Claire's gaze swept over her as if she were an uninvited insect in her bedroom.

Claire, Darian said again.

I know, Darian! she replied, hoping the man in her head didn't distract her.

"Hello, Claire," she said, extending a hand. "We haven't formally met. I'm ..." Claire shook her hand, and the visions that protruded into her thoughts floored her.

Czerno.

"... I'm Sofia," she choked out. "I wanted to welcome you."

"Enchanté, Sofia. It's my pleasure," Claire said. "Pierre will defend you well. Damian couldn't have chosen a better guard."

"Babysitter," Pierre corrected her.

"Exactly," Sofia agreed. "I didn't have a choice."

"If you must be with a man, it's good that he's French," Claire said with a wink at Pierre.

"Please excuse me."

Sofia stepped out of her way, trying hard to digest what she'd seen.

Claire and Czerno in bed together.

"Sofi!" Damian's call pulled her from the vision replaying in her head. "C'mon!"

He waved her out of the theatre and led her toward the mansion. She sensed his excitement and trailed, troubled.

"Heya, Dust-man!"

Three men stood in the main foyer, two in the same shade of brown as her bodyguard and a striking man in designer jeans and an expensive sweater. He shook hands with Damian, a small smile on his chiseled features. Dustin was lean and handsome with clear, cool blue eyes and sharp, angular features. His hair was sandy blond, his skin golden. His noble features and cold, aloof air gave her the impression of an ancient Greek prince.

"Good to see you!" Damian said with warmth she hadn't seen him display toward anyone else.

"Better circumstances this time around," Dustin said with a glance at her.

"Hold the salt, Dust-man," Damian warned. "Sofia, this is Dusty, the commander of the western hemisphere. He helped me rescue you from Czerno."

Her face felt warm at the look both gave her.

"It's a pleasure, *ikira*," Dustin said and held out his hand to her, palm up. She looked at it curiously, then at Damian.

"You haven't taught her shit, have you?" Dustin asked Damian.

"Not the traditional greeting."

"*Ikira*, in our time, an Oracle greeted all visitors to the king's palace to assess their loyalties to her king. Visitors held out their hands like this," Dusty said, indicating his outstretched hand. "It's a sign of the ultimate respect. The visitor is giving you an open invitation to his soul. You have the option to touch me or not."

She braced herself and placed her palm against his. His memories were much like Damian's: fuzzy home videos with no sense of his future. She removed her hand. Dustin assessed her in silence for a few seconds, and she had the feeling his sharp gaze missed nothing.

"You're better off than when I saw you last," he said at last and turned to Damian. "You got time to talk, D?"

"Yep. Before we do, I need to discuss something with both of you. Come." He motioned them both down the hall and into his private study. "Pierre, stay."

Pierre obeyed and closed the doors behind him.

"How's Florida?" Damian asked, crossing to his desk.

"Good. Looking forward to Christmas," Dustin replied.

"Don't expect anything from Jule. He'll never remember Christmas. I already ordered your present."

"That's why I like you better."

"Dusty likes presents," Damian explained, glancing at Sofia.

"*Good* presents," Dustin clarified. "None of that shit you gave me last year."

"You don't get to pick. A present's a present."

Sofia sat in one of the plush chairs, legs pulled to her chest, and watched their brotherly exchange. Dustin didn't look like the kind of man who would like anything, let alone presents. She glanced toward the door, mind on what she'd learned earlier.

Claire. Darian wasn't crying for once, and his voice almost too hushed to make out.

Damian dropped an envelope on the table in front of her.

"There are traitors on the council," Damian started. "Our European front has been growing progressively weaker the past hundred years. They know what they shouldn't about our capabilities and our weaknesses. Jule's going crazy trying to keep up."

He pulled photos from the envelope as he spoke. Dustin began sorting through them. She didn't want to look, sensing she'd met a source of their issues already.

"Sofia, Han tells me you've gotten quite good at reading people," he said. "The quarterly council meeting is tonight. You'll get to meet all my council members."

Dread trickled through her.

"You can tell me who the traitors are."

"Is this what Oracles do?" she forced herself to ask.

"Oracles do many things, but this is one of them," Dustin responded. "It's unfortunate you don't have a mentor to show you more about your talents. The ability for you to determine a traitor from a loyalist is one of your most valuable talents. It's also what makes people hate Oracles."

"People hate Oracles?" she repeated, distraught.

"Let me rephrase-- people *fear* Oracles. It's a good thing. The more people fear you, the less they'll fuck with you," Dustin said.

She rested her chin on her knees, gazing at Damian.

"You'll identify the traitors," Damian continued.

"Then we take them out back and--" Dustin ran his finger across his throat.

"You kill them?" she whispered, horrified. She gripped her throat with one hand.

"Bad people," Damian said. "People who would kill you. People like Czerno. Dusty takes care of these kinds of people."

"Yep," Dustin agreed.

She shuddered as the distant sensation of burning returned. If any man deserved death, it was Czerno. But *did* any man deserve death? And if she told Damian who to kill, did that make her *worse* than them? Her eyes slid to Dustin as she tried to reconcile the executioner with the man who liked presents. She met Damian's gaze.

"Ours is not a pretty world, *kiri*," he said firmly. "This is what you are."

It wasn't the reassurance she hoped for.

Stop Claire, Darian all but demanded. *Trust Damian*.

The dead man was getting annoying. The plan to identify traitors made sense, as ugly as it was. Who better to weed out traitors than the one who could see them for what they were?

"I wanted to see if you're to the point where you don't need human touch," Damian said, gesturing to the pictures.

She shook her head. She leapt up and closed the door behind her, turmoil in her breast. She didn't belong in the human world anymore, and yet, she couldn't just dump it. Her thoughts darkened and returned to Cody and Jake.

No, she could never become as cold and accepting of death as the men around her, even if they were at war with a monster like Czerno.

But it's my fate.

* * *

Damian's gaze lingered on the door after the Oracle fled. Something more than Dusty killing bad guys was upsetting her.

"Wasn't expecting that. Wanna visit the sector?" he asked, turning his attention to Dusty. "I'll show you what Rainy's guys found."

"Yeah."

He held out his hand, and Dusty clasped his wrist, allowing Damian to Travel them both to Tucson Sector HQ. They appeared in the quiet living room, turning at the startled gasp. Rainy's Natural, a beautiful woman with mocha skin and blue eyes, leapt up from her seat.

"No worries, Traci," Damian said, seeing her panicked look. She'd been there for about two months, not yet enough time to acclimate to the Guardians.

"Rainy around?" Dusty asked.

Traci's eyes were on Damian. A human's reaction to him never ceased to intrigue him. It was irritating most of the time, like now when he wanted to get a quick response out of one.

"Traci," Dusty said more sharply. She looked to him and blinked.

"He's sleeping," she said at last.

"You wanna wake him up or you want us to?" Damian asked in amusement. She hesitated only a moment longer before bolting and disappearing up a set of stairs.

"Can't take you anywhere, D," Dusty complained.

"Like you're normal," he replied.

"Who decorated this place?" Dusty groused, taking in the lopsided posters of cars and beer bottle décor.

"You're such a woman, Dusty," Damian said with a chuckle.

"Speaking of women ..." his friend said, pinning him with a look. "What's up with your Oracle? She didn't seem happy today."

"Damned if I know. She walked in on me and Claire last night."

"I bet that went well," Dusty said dryly.

"Nothing happened, and they're both pissed at me. You didn't tell me Claire was coming this way, Dusty."

"D, I didn't know. You can blame Jule for that one. Is Sofia doing any oracl-ing yet?"

"She's learning. Han says she's progressing pretty quickly, though since none of us know how to train her, it's hard to tell. She's trying," Damian said. "We'll find out what she can do when our guests arrive."

"*Ikir*, boss," Rainy greeted them as he trotted down the stairs, dressed in jeans and nothing else. "You scared the shit outta Traci."

Damian caught his eye and looked pointedly at Dusty, silently asking if the Guardian had done as he asked and told his boss that the Natural was more than a new recruit. Rainy smiled faintly with a nod.

"What'd you find?" Dusty asked, oblivious to the exchange.

"Traci found several of the vamps' stash houses here in Tucson," Rainy said, motioning them to follow him into a small, dark study humming with electronics.

He sat down in front of a computer and pulled up a satellite image with the stash houses marked.

"This is what's interesting," he said, pointing to a trail leading from a stash house on the northeastern side of the city and dead ending in the desert. "She can't pick up anything past this point."

He drew a box around a large area.

"Only you and Czerno can put up one of those types of shields," Dusty muttered to Damian.

"And it's not mine," Damian responded. "Any cell phone intercepts on why he's in town?"

"The local intelligence collection team is having a problem tracking his vamps. We think they're using disposable cells. As soon as we get a number, it goes inoperable."

"But we know he's here," Dusty said.

"Yeah, pretty sure. This area is ten square miles, though. Unless we know where to look, we won't find where his base is."

"It can't be a coincidence he's here, a few miles from *you*," Dusty said, turning to Damian.

Damian nodded. He suspected Czerno's Watcher allies tipped him off.

"The vamps we've captured for interrogation have a new technique. They've been killing themselves with cyanide pills," Rainy added.

"What happened in Europe is happening here," Damian said, meeting Dusty's gaze.

"Antoine probably wasn't the main threat in Europe."

Dusty studied him, an odd look crossing his face. Damian waited expectantly, but Dusty shook his head.

"It's probably nothing," Dusty said. "I'll check the records to see which Guardians rotated here from Europe from the past year."

"After the Quarterly, we'll pack up and clean up," Damian said. "Hopefully, Sofi can tell us who's on Czerno's payroll."

"I hope so," Dusty replied. "Rainy, can your Natural trace anything at all within the square?"

"Nope, though I've only let her past the barrier once. Not sure what traps Czerno might have set."

Dusty gave Damian a cool look, and he heard the unspoken warning about women being the downfall of mankind. He smiled.

"Send the UAVs over the area," Dusty said. "We'll see what we can see."

"Got it," Rainy said, turning to face them. "I need more people, boss, or a Traveler at least."

"I've got several incoming," Dusty replied. "Damian, Travelers?"

"None have survived recruitment," he said grimly. "We had three in the last class, more than we've seen in a few hundred years. All three were gunned down. Jule's short, too. We can pull in a Natural from Latin America. He's the closest."

"Hector?"

"Yeah."

"I'll contact his station chief," Dusty said, pulling out his phone. "Whoever is taking out the recruits knows who to hit first."

"They do indeed," Damian agreed.

"Call me if you need a Traveler in the meantime, Rainy," Dusty directed. "I'll make myself available."

"Thanks, boss," Rainy said. "You have a new Natural, *ikir*?"

"I do," Damian answered.

"If she's flipping out, you can call Lon's wife, Linda. Traci hasn't adjusted yet, and Linda's been a big help."

"Linda's the talker, right?" Dusty asked, glancing up from his phone.

"Yeah. Good girl," Rainy said.

Damian had been considering how to help Sofia adjust. She seemed like a solitary person, but he wondered if she'd benefit from meeting the Natural women in the organization. She'd been stuck in the mansion since he'd found her, mainly because he wasn't about to let a fucking *Oracle*-- the first in a few hundred thousand years!-- out of the safest place he could put her. His gaze returned to the screen as he deliberated over how close Czerno was and shelved the thought of letting her out of his sight.

"I'll keep it in mind," he said.

"Jasmine's pissed, but Hector will be in this weekend," Dusty said.

"Awesome, boss."

"Dust-man, we've got a Quarterly to prep for," Damian said.

"Let's go," Dusty agreed. "Rainy, thanks. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Roger, boss."

Damian's attention lingered on the image on Rainy's screen. He couldn't help the sense of unease sliding through him. He didn't like the new level of battle Czerno was fighting. The playing field was as uneven as the Watcher had warned, and it appeared as though Czerno's Watchers weren't as dedicated to non-interference as *his* Watcher was.

At least he'd know who the traitors were by the end of the night.

CHAPTER NINE

Sonoran Desert, Arizona

The Black God's southwest base camp

"What the fuck are you doing here?" the vamp demanded.

Two dropped his arms to his side.

"Water," he said.

"Slaves don't drink the master's water."

Two felt the stinging blow at the back of his head and wobbled, dropping to his knees. One of his master's men-- the one with the red eyes-- shoved him away and took his canteen, dumping its contents.

"Get the fuck outta here!"

He threw the canteen and it hit Two's cheek. Two took his canteen and rose. He moved mechanically out of the single large kitchen in the underground lair. He went back to his small room and sat on the bed staring at the white wall in front of him.

"Two, what're you doing?" another voice, this one softer, asked.

He didn't remember when this man had arrived or why he was supposed to remember him. But he knew he must remember him as he did his master. He concluded he was his master's friend, or he wouldn't be here. His master's friend, the man with eyes as green as the moss in the corner of Two's room, stood in his doorway.

"I'm thinking, master," Two said.

"Thinking?"

His master's friend was powerful. Two sensed it and cringed as he entered the room. His master's friend had never hit him, but he scared Two.

"Slaves don't think, Two," his master's friend said. "What are you thinking?"

"I see a woman in my head," Two said.

"What woman?"

"I don't know her."

"What does she look like?"

Kiri. He didn't know where the word came from or what it meant. It sounded pretty, like the poof the desert dust made when the first drops of rain fell. The last time he went to the surface, it had rained huge raindrops. Then a rainbow had come out, and he'd stared at it until his master beat him.

"Slave, what does she look like?" There was an impatient note in his master's friend's voice that scared him.

"Who, master?" Two asked.

"The woman."

"What woman?"

"The woman in your head," the master's friend said.

Kiri. A strange voice in his head spoke the word again, and he saw the woman with blue and silver eyes. She was crying, because his master was going to hurt her.

Don't cry, kiri, he thought.

"Did you remember to do as I told you? Did you stop drinking the juice your master gave you?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

He looked up, surprised to see his master's friend in his doorway, the man with eyes the color of the moss in the corner of his room. He rose in respect.

"Yes, master."

"Good boy. You must do as I tell you," his master's friend said. "It's very important you don't drink that juice ever again. Don't forget."

"Yes, master."

"Come. Your master calls for you."

Two obeyed. He followed the man with eyes as green as the moss in the corner of his room down the busy hallways, unaffected by the men who spit on him or shoved him as he went. Slaves were treated this way. The man with mossy eyes turned down a corner and vanished from his sight and thoughts. Two continued to the master's command center, where his master was planning a battle. As usual, Two took up his place in the corner to await his master's orders.

He'd had a dream last night, something he never remembered in the morning, except for this time. He thought hard. There were many people in his dream, and he thought he should remember them. He heard the strange voice again.

Kiri. The woman with the blue and silver eyes came from his dream! She was talking to him. He didn't know what she said, but she was holding out a hand to him, crying. Uneasiness swept over him. He didn't want her to cry.

Don't cry, kiri.

But she kept crying.

"Two, coffee," his master said.

Two obeyed and left the room filled with lights and computers. The man with green eyes was waiting for him in the hall and touched his arm. Two cringed. He saw the woman come into focus, and the man with mossy eyes released him.

He went to the kitchen. The woman stayed with him. Two wondered if she'd ever come out of his head, or if she had to stay there, like he stayed in his master's corner. If she stayed in his head, his master wouldn't beat her like he did him.

* * *

Stay there, kiri. I'll take care of you.

"Are you hungry?"

Sofia jerked from her place beside her window, not sure which voice came from her head and which from the handsome man before her. She'd watched the arriving guests with a mixture of fascination and dread. They wore tuxedos and ball gowns like wealthy celebrities attending an exclusive Hollywood party. Beautiful women that rivaled Claire and men so handsome, even age couldn't diminish their muscular bodies or riveting looks.

"You're not dressed," Damian said. He wore a white shirt and snug tuxedo pants that outlined long, thick thighs and a tight ass. His body drew her, and his scent surrounded her when he knelt beside her.

She wanted to tell him about Claire, but she was afraid to. He cared for Claire, or at least, he was attracted to her, and she didn't know if there was more than what she knew about them.

He held out his wrist, and she grudgingly took it, drinking from him while smelling the scents of the feast being prepared for his guests.

It's not fair. The taste of him filled her, calmed her. She let her head drop back and sighed.

"You should get dressed, Sofia."

He wiped the corner of her mouth, and she resisted the urge to nip his finger. His warm lips met hers, and she opened her eyes, surprised. He kissed her gently, a long, slow kiss. She savored the sensations of his hot, wet mouth and the buzz she got feeding from him.

"Come, meet your people."

She watched him retreat, desire burning within her. Pierre had brought in a dress box and shoe box earlier. She flipped on the light and opened the dress box. Inside was the most beautiful gown she'd ever seen in a mysterious shade of dark blue sprinkled with silver sequins. The dress was thick silk and moved like water as she pulled it free and held it against her.

It must have cost a fortune!

She picked up the box to toss it on the chair when something slid out. She opened the slender jewelry box and gasped. Inside sparkled a diamond choker with an unusually worn, plain charm of a half-sun, half-moon pierced by an arrow. Diamond earrings completed the set.

If the dress didn't break him, the jewelry did! Sofia lifted the choker carefully, touching the charm.

"What are you, little friend?" she murmured. It must have been significant to be surrounded by so many diamonds! She marveled over the clothing and jewelry before changing. She pulled her hair into a simple French twist, the kind she wore to work, and applied her make-up carefully.

Her irises were half silver. Sofia gazed at her two-toned eyes. They sparkled like the blue dress and diamonds. She looked herself over, satisfied that she looked good. Not Claire-good, but good enough.

"His colors and his symbol." Pierre greeted her with an approving smile that buoyed her.

"Is that what this is?" she asked, fingering the charm.

"It's old, maybe as old as him. His family's coat of arms, if they had those then. Very special. Even he does not wear it," Pierre said and motioned her to follow him towards the party below.

She trailed him down the stairs, eyes on the guests milling in the courtyard beyond the opened double doors. Damian and Dustin appeared deep in discussion as she approached. Both wore tuxedos with matching blue cummerbunds, which amused her for such starkly different men. Claire, stunning in maroon and bedecked with diamonds and rubies, looked her over dismissively before returning her gaze to the men.

"*Ikira,*" Dustin said, breaking away. His blue gaze swept over her. "You look lovely."

She eyed him and then looked to Damian, who stared at her with an intensity she'd last seen aimed at Claire.

I am so hot. Sofia almost laughed at herself. She lowered her gaze at the heated look from the man who drove her crazy every other minute of her day. She cleared her throat and focused on Dustin.

"You guys match," she observed.

"Only because of *my* efforts," Dustin said with an edge that warned her not to laugh.

He's sensitive about that shit, like a woman, Damian whispered into her mind. She coughed to cover her startled laugh. Dustin looked at her then tossed a look over his shoulder at Damian before directing her away.

"Dick," Dustin said under his breath. "Come, *ikira*. The guests must be greeted."

"Is it really necessary?" she asked. Her cheer faded. He motioned her toward the entrance to the courtyard.

"It is."

She felt Damian's gaze on her as they walked away. She wanted to warn him about Claire... Later. After this latest ordeal.

She stood beside Dustin on one side of the entrance while Damian and Claire assumed the other. Claire was all over him, in his space, rubbing her breasts against him. Sofia watched, astonished at the blatant display, and almost didn't prep herself for her first encounter.

The first man was in his prime, and his eyes crinkled in a genuine smile when he clasped hands with Dustin. They exchanged a greeting in a foreign language that sounded like Russian before he held out his hand to her. His eyes went to the symbol at her neck, and one eyebrow shot up. His name ... *Sasha*.

She saw killing in his future, but only in defense of his family. She released her breath and prepared herself for the next, relieved the encounter wasn't as bad as she expected.

She had greeted ten men and two women before she felt the first flash of cold. The man before her was middle-aged and handsome, but she saw his dealings with Czerno's men. He sold out Damian's men-- his own men-- for money. *Antoine*.

The second traitor came soon after, a man whose past stunned her. She held his hand longer than she should. The man looked no older than Damian and was indeed from the same era.

He and Claire sold out Damian's brother to Czerno. *Isac*.

If Damian knew the woman trying to crawl back into his bed had helped murder his brother, her husband... She couldn't see him over the crowd. Her throat tightened in unshed tears of sorrow and anger.

Damian's world was brutal. *Her* world was brutal.

"Be strong, *kiri*," Dustin said without looking at her.

She swallowed hard and held out her hand to another woman in red. The last man in line was the final traitor, a man who'd helped Jilian torture his wife then claimed Czerno's men had done it. *Haydaen*.

She all but snatched her hand away, overwhelmed at the images in her head. Dustin escorted the man into the mansion, and Pierre wrapped an arm around her as she sagged.

Pierre unloading his shotgun on the man in executioner's garb from Czerno's. It was dark, cold, and the shots hit the man with lopsided shoulders, dropping him dead to the ground. An explosion blazed in the distance. A woman was screaming, another man shouting.

"So much death," she whispered. She pushed herself away and leaned against a wall. Dustin returned for her. She wiped tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, *kiri*," he said with rare warmth. "Remember, we want them to fear you. Don't let them see you cry."

She steeled herself and nodded. She didn't want to disappoint him or Damian and couldn't help but dread the conversation to come. She tried to think of how she could soften the pain she'd bring him.

Dustin escorted her into the boisterous banquet room, and her spirits fell further. She was seated at the end of the table opposite Damian while Claire claimed the spot to his left. The seat of honor was given to Sasha. Dustin sat beside her. From what little she knew about etiquette, she was occupying the seat of the lady of the house. A few of the guests cast curious looks her way, and everyone who looked at her seemed more interested in the plain charm at her chest than in meeting her gaze.

Caterers served up food she'd kill to eat. Sofia watched the plates swap out before her as those around her gorged themselves on gourmet dishes she'd only seen on TV. As each course came and went, she felt another piece of her die.

What's done can't be undone.

She stared at the embroidered tablecloth, tormented by the scent of food she couldn't eat and the visions of death and betrayal that left an acrid taste in her mouth. No one spoke to her. She wasn't human. She wasn't one of *them*. A freak among freaks. Would she spend eternity like this, doomed to knowing only the dark secrets of those around her? If Dustin's words were true, she'd never be welcomed into the home of any of Damian's people, not if they feared the sight of her! Once she told Damian about the woman whose hand rested intimately on his arm, who he smiled at with genuine affection ...

If not for the dead man in her head, she'd be alone.

She fled the banquet hall for the library. Pierre trailed, balancing a plate of food. She stood before the window, feeling very much like a prisoner in her new world. She wondered if the dead man in her head, Darian, felt this way when he cried. She heard Dustin order Pierre out before he approached her.

"Sofia, I need to ask you something, and I need you to tell me the truth," Dustin said in a soft, firm voice.

She hugged herself, waiting.

"Claire ...?" His unfinished question lingered in the silence between them.

"Yes," she whispered.

He tensed. She looked up at him, sensing both his anger and his regret. His blue eyes were colder than the sky on a winter morning in Virginia. She resisted the urge to move away from him, chilled by the visions of his work as Damian's executioner.

"I thought so," he said at last. His face softened as he looked at her. "You have to tell him, sweetheart."

"It'll kill him."

"He must know. You don't carry this burden alone."

She nodded, throat tight. With a squeeze of her arm, he left her.

"Sofi." Damian's voice jarred her from her thoughts.

She wiped her eyes before turning to face whatever new challenge Damian brought with him. He was accompanied by Dustin and two other men, one she knew as Sasha, a man who'd struck her with his devotedness to his family, and Levi, a man who'd been present in many of his pre-Schism memories.

Damian's gaze swept over her. He was the lord and master again, his form and commanding presence filling up the room. His display of checked power disturbed her.

"Sasha, Levi, this is *Ikira* Sofia," he said.

"An honor, *ikira*," Sasha said with a bow.

"We've waited many years for you, *ikira*," Levi said.

"Sasha and Levi are two of my most trusted advisors. Sasha manages the operations for Dusty out of Miami and Levi for Jule in Europe," Damian explained.

"We've been through much together," Levi added. "I owe D my life."

"I'm honored to meet you both," she said.

"Shall we review what you've learned?" Damian asked. His tone was genuinely questioning, and she felt grateful that he was giving her the choice to opt out. She met Dustin's gaze, sensing he felt the same pain she did.

"I'm ready," she said with more confidence than she felt.

They sat around the low table still scattered with pictures. Pierre remained at the door. She sifted through the pictures, aware of the intent attention the others paid her. She found Antoine and drew his picture out. She swallowed hard, uncomfortable with playing the role of judge and jury.

"Antoine," she said. "He's a spy for Czerno. Czerno pays him well for the locations of the safe houses in Europe and the names and locations of the Guardians."

"That we knew," Sasha said with a firm nod.

"Haydaen," she said, drawing out another. "His wife's death was by his own hand. He felt you suspected him and devised a plot with Czerno to torture ..." Her voice caught at the images replaying through her mind. Damian reached across the table and touched her face, dismissing them. "... to torture and blame her death on Jilian. He sold out his family for money and land in Italy."

No one spoke. She reached Isac's picture and stopped, looking up at Damian.

"Damian ..."

"Whatever it is, it's okay," he said.

"Isac. He killed your brother." She struggled to control her emotions as the words came out. She didn't think anyone heard her choked words. Silence followed. When she was brave enough, she looked up at Damian. He had leaned back in his seat, his face a frozen mask. She met Dustin's penetrating gaze.

"And Claire," she added.

"Claire *what?*" Damian growled in a voice that bordered on inhuman.

"She and Isac." She couldn't bring herself to say what they'd done. The words were too painful, and by the predatory stillness of the man across from her, she was terrified of what he'd do if she said it again. He rose, as if on autopilot, turned, and faced the window.

"I know you're jealous, but this is disgusting," he said in a low voice so sharp she jumped.

"I'd never do that to you," she said, unable to stop the tears she'd been holding back since the start of the evening. "She's sleeping with Czerno and feeding him the names of the new Guardians. She and Isac killed your brother. They plotted together during the hunting trip you and your brother took the day before he died. Claire lured him away from his Guardians to the warm springs by the--"

"*Enough!*" He faced her, eyes whirling madly. His accusation and fury were plain on his flushed face.

"Why do you think she came here? She wants to find a way to kill you, too!" She forced herself to continue.

"You jealous little bi--"

Before she knew what she did, she'd closed the distance between them and slapped him hard. Fury bubbled within her, breaking free.

"Tonight, I've given you the last shred of me that was human!" she shouted. "I just signed their death warrants, and you think I'd stoop so low as to point the gun at someone because I'm *jealous*? You think I'd sell my soul because of something so stupid? I'm doing this for *you*! This is what I am! But you know what, Damian? Fuck you. *Fuck you!*"

Hurt, she fled into the cold night air, stopping only when she reached the center of the gardens. Pierre trotted after her. She dropped to her knees and sobbed, unable to control her pain and fear.

* * *

Damian started after her, furious. Dusty caught his arm and motioned for those in the library to leave.

"You're a dick. You know how hard it was for her to tell you that?" his closest friend snapped.

Damian glared at him, his restraint on his powers rippling. Long-buried rage was bubbling upward, along with the tiny instinct he'd squashed thousands of years ago.

"I can't believe--"

"I believe her, Damian," Dusty said in a calm voice. "Claire's been on the European front for a hundred years. She just rotated to the southwest on orders that neither you nor Jule nor I issued, and the Tucson sites have fallen like flies. Because of her natural ability, she's been intimately involved in screening new recruits. It'd be easy for her to flag the newbies for Czerno's men."

Dusty's words floored him, and Damian couldn't help but feel hurt that his best friend hadn't told him of his suspicions sooner. He paced, mind racing with memories he could no longer suppress, thoughts of his brother, of Claire, of Darian's death. Sofia's words freed them from deep within his mind, and Dusty's hammering at the facts made it impossible for him to silence them as he wanted to.

I don't know if I trust my wife, brother.

Maybe Darian hadn't been talking about infidelity but about something else. The memories came faster. Darian was chopped into so many pieces that there'd been no body to bury. Not providing his brother a proper burial-- the burial of a king!-- had sickened him. Almost as bad, how many others had died from the treachery of a single Guardian? How many Guardians had he lost *this year alone*? How many humans were dead because he lacked the strength to face his instincts?

He roared and slammed his hands on the desk at the far end of the library, unable to stop the images racing through his mind. Claire was all that remained of his brother, and he'd loved her out of respect for a man whose death he'd never been able to accept. Memories of how much Darian loved Claire, of his own nights in her bed, overwhelmed him. That she'd used him, killed Darian ...

"Damian." Dusty's whisper brought him out of his mind, and he realized he was kneeling on the floor with his head bowed. "Brother."

He knew Dusty was right, knew Sofia was right, knew he'd known since just after Darian's death that there was something not right about Claire but was too desperate to hold onto the last piece of his brother to face the truth. He was reliving the pain of Darian's death, sickened by his own cowardice. Darian had even tried to warn him, and he'd never wanted to see what was in front of him.

Forgive me, brother.

"I know, Dusty," he admitted in a thick voice. "I think I've always known."

"No, Damian, you couldn't have known how twisted she was. No one could."

"Even someone who reads minds?" he demanded with a bitter laugh.

"Did you ever read hers?"

"No. It was Darian's rule-- if you trust someone, don't do it. She is ... was the last of my family."

If he had, how many thousands of lives would have been saved? How good was a Defender of Humanity who purposely looked away from something that led to so many deaths?

"Darian's death is not your fault," Dusty said in a hushed tone.

Damian closed his eyes. Dusty knelt beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing.

"Trust me," he whispered. "We're in this together."

The words were familiar, the same words he'd spoken to Dusty thousands of years ago, when he'd discovered the youth who was not yet a man on a slave trader's block, bloodied and

weeping for the family he'd just lost. He met Dusty's pale blue eyes and saw his pain reflected in Dusty's tight face.

"These Oracles are dangerous," Dusty said with a faint smile. "I forgot that part about them."

"Darian's finally dead to me," Damian said hoarsely. "Tonight, I lose him forever."

"You've still got me and Jule," Dusty reminded him. "And a terrified little Oracle who's sobbing her eyes out right now."

"I fucked that up."

"She's resilient to make it this far. She'll be okay," Dusty said. "As for the traitors, I'm offering up my skill set, if you need it."

"You can have the others. I'll deal with Claire."

"Are you sure?" Dusty asked.

"I should have done this long ago, brother. No one else will die because of me."

Dusty's phone dinged, and he retrieved it. "Jule's asking if you're okay."

"Tell him we identified his Europe issue," Damian said and picked himself up, grateful for Dusty's presence. "Have the four rounded up. Let them sweat for a day, then do whatever you want with the three."

"Interrogation? Execution?"

"Both."

Dusty nodded and strode out. He'd not had to work too hard for confessions in the past thousand years, not after word of his cold, methodological skills leaked to the Guardians. Dusty was a one-man Internal Affairs department. The Guardians knew that betrayal would be confronted by Dusty, and even those loyal to Damian feared him appearing unexpectedly at their door.

Damian knew him well enough to know all the tales weren't true. His reputation alone was enough to make most men weep when confronted. But this time, he suspected Dusty would live up to his legend.

As for Claire ... pain spiraled through him. He waited in the library until he'd composed himself and left for his suite. He couldn't stem the memories flooding his mind and felt the wound of Darian's death reopen wider than it had originally been.

Pierre was in front of Sofia's door. Damian stopped, guilty yet too raw to confront her. Pierre glanced up from his video game at his hesitation.

"She sleeps, *ikir*," he supplied. "It's the best time to deal with her."

Damian snorted. Pierre's lip was completely insubordinate, and it was obvious he'd never worked for Dusty. Dusty was a stickler for formality from his men, while Jule's hemisphere was far more relaxed. Damian didn't care; Sofia liked Pierre, and he had a feeling Pierre's blunt dose of reality was soothing to her in a world where nothing else made sense.

He entered her room, emitting enough of his power to hide him from her senses. Her curtains were open, as they had been every night since she transformed. Her face was streaked with tears, her eyes puffy even in sleep. Her sleep was troubled. He sensed the visions in her head, not surprised to see his own black memories playing on the screens on the back of her eyelids along with a dark nightmare of a man in a corner crying. He wondered if the man was his soul, weeping for his brother.

He sat down heavily in the corner, watching her. He was ashamed of his last words to her. She'd struggled with Claire, wanting to spare him the pain he'd unleashed on her. Her eyes had been shadowed since he met her, her own struggle with her new world taking a visible toll on her. The videos running through her head were dark and disturbing, had been since she entered his world. They drove her away from him and the true purpose of his Guardians. She was alone and segregated, partly because she was new, and partly because an Oracle's soul-reading job was brutal enough that most Oracles-- including his mother-- killed themselves soon after their full powers manifested within them.

He wanted her to see what he saw, the good his Guardians did for humanity, the courageous, selfless hearts of his men, the difference they made in fighting evil. It was a war his family had been fighting for millennia, one that wouldn't end even with his death. He ached to show her how much she meant to him, to open her closed vision of him and his world and show her the beauty that made him fight as he did.

She saw nothing but death and the darkness in every soul she ran across.

Yet she tried to learn her new role with a selflessness that struck him now as incredible. Everything she did, she did for *him*, even if she feared him. Jule had always said he inspired men to follow him, though he saw nothing different in what he did than what his deputies did. He'd been as gentle with her as he'd known how, and still she suffered under the weight of the visions. For the first time in his life, he felt helpless to help the small form of the woman before him.

He rubbed his face, mind going to Dusty. Despite his reserve, he could tell Dusty liked her. He suspected it was because the same mettle lining Dusty's backbone lined hers. They had similar cool reserve, unlike Damian and Jule, and had both survived ordeals that would cripple anyone else. He understood why she'd looked at Dusty before telling him about Claire. She'd found courage in a kindred soul.

He leaned forward. He'd hurt her tonight. He didn't want to hurt her. Ever. Even with all his powers, his armies, his ability to read minds, he didn't know how to make things right with her. True, they had eternity to figure each other out, but he didn't want her turning cold like Dusty or jaded like Jule. He loved her fresh innocence, her selfless courage. He loved her hugs, though he'd never experienced hugs since he was a babe. He liked that she sought him out, not as the leader of the Guardians, not as the White God, not as the Defender of Mankind. She wanted *him*, the man behind the titles and the power.

He'd treated her like shit tonight, and he was at a loss as to how to prevent the tortured existence that became the fate of most Oracles.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He snatched it and Travel himself out of her room before he woke her. Jule's text message brought him back to the unpleasant task ahead of him.

I'll be in town in a day or two. Dusty told me everything.

Grimly, he returned grudgingly to his duties of entertaining his guests, feeling as if he needed to do something for his little Oracle.

* * *

"Sofia."

She stirred from her trance at the voice, mind replaying scenes of Darian's death. Darian had quieted as the scenes of his violent demise played through her dreams. He sat in the dark corner of her mind, still and silent.

"We must go, Sofia." Pierre spoke from her doorway, framed against the light of the hall. The clock read 2:38.

"Right now?" she asked, confused.

"It's important."

The thought of Czerno loose somewhere in the house made her sit up quickly. She still wore the gown, though strands of hair blinded her and she knew her pillow would be filled with makeup. Pierre eyed her and crossed to her bathroom, tossing several items into her travel bag. She fixed her hair while sliding on her shoes.

"Is Czerno here?" she asked.

"Mon dieu non!"

"Then what's the rush?"

He waved her out and led her at a quick pace to the front door.

"You look terrible," he said, considering her.

"Rough night," she muttered and snatched her makeup bag from him.

A town car with darkened windows awaited them. She spent the next half hour in the dim lighting of the car fixing her makeup with Pierre's persistent pointers. They entered a large neighborhood and drove the same few blocks a few times before stopping in front of a large adobe hacienda walled off from its neighbors.

"Go inside. I'll wait 'til you enter the gate. You'll be safe," he instructed her.

She hesitated then exited the car and shivered in the late night breeze. The town car left as she stepped inside the gate. She knocked on the door. When no one answered, she knocked again. It wrenched open, and a man in a black trench coat Damian's size looked her over once.

"Not tonight. Get the fuck outta here." And he slammed the door. Sofia took a step back and silently urged Pierre to hurry. Damian's men were not the type she wanted to piss off.

"Why are you not inside, mademoiselle?" Pierre asked, agitated as he trotted through the gate. "It's not safe out here."

"You said it was."

"Relatively speaking, it's much safer inside."

Sofia swallowed a retort. Pierre pounded on the door with the discretion of a jackhammer. The door opened, and a different, blond man looked them over before stepping back.

"Pierre," her bodyguard introduced himself, clapping him on the arm.

"Everyone and their mothers are here tonight. You might as well come in," was the surly response.

"What happened?"

"Rainy was supposed to protect a Natural he found. The vamps fucked her up real good tonight."

"What's her talent?" Pierre asked.

"Tracking."

Sofia listened and trailed them through the house that resembled a frat house. The only décor consisted of international beer bottle displays and pictures of scantily clad women or cars. The living room was equipped with a massive flat screen television and worn furniture. They reached a second foyer where the man in the trench stood next to a caramel-colored man covered in blood.

"This is the Tucson Sector team," Pierre said. "They're the Guardians at the operational front of our war. Their job is to kill the vamps and any other of Czerno's creatures while minimizing collateral damage."

"You mean without killing anyone else," she said, crossing her arms again.

"It's one of our most sacred creeds: we do not kill humans. Sometimes we find Naturals, humans with the ability to track Czerno's creatures or to heal our kind or some other natural talent."

"Like me?"

"Sorta."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means you're in a category all by yourself, but if it gets my point across, sure."

"You're an ass, Pierre."

He moved away from her to meet the others. The tension of the stiff forms in the foyer was overwhelming. Without Pierre, she'd never set foot in such a dangerous situation.

"Rainy, Ving, Justin, this is Pierre," the surly blond said.

The bloody man-- Rainy-- looked at her with pure hostility. The other two were too occupied by whatever happened to do more than glance at the newcomer. Ving-- the man in the trench coat-- looked at Sofia.

"What the fuck? Lon, did you let her in?" he asked.

"Yeah. She's with him."

The four stared at her. If she ran, they'd eat her, she was sure. So she stayed put and hugged herself more tightly. Pierre was at ease among his own kind.

"You a doctor?" Rainy demanded.

"Damian sent her," Pierre answered.

Rainy hesitated before throwing open the door he guarded. Pierre motioned her forward, and she went, afraid of what she'd find. As she passed Rainy, she noticed the lines of worry in his face. His gaze was stormy, but there was more there, a profound sadness that made the large man more human.

She entered, and Rainy closed the door behind her. A bloodied woman lay on the bed, unconscious and breathing shallowly. A brunette woman worked to stabilize her, and Sofia froze in place.

She didn't want to see more death.

"Can you give me a hand?" the woman called over her shoulder. "I need this hung high."

She held up an IV bag. Sofia forced herself to walk over and take it. The woman looked up at her, surprised. She was in her mid-twenties, with crystal clear blue eyes and porcelain skin.

"I thought you were ... never mind," she said, scurrying around the bed. "It's better you help anyway. The boys are clumsy."

Sofia looked down at the beautiful woman on the bed before jerry-rigging the IV over a lamp to keep it elevated.

"Is she going to be okay?" she asked then realized how stupid her question was when she could see the future.

"I'm not sure."

Sofia sat down on the bed, careful to keep the blood from her gown, and touched the woman's face, bracing herself. What she saw amazed her, and her eyes watered, this time out of relief and happiness. *Traci.*

"She's bleeding internally," she said.

"Are you sure?" the woman asked.

"It's her spleen. Can you fix that?"

The brunette paled before belting, "Rainy!"

The door flew open. Sofia stood as his hot gaze fell to her, sensing he wanted no stranger near the woman.

"We need to take her to the hospital, *now*," the brunette told him.

He shot forward and gathered the woman in his arms while the second woman scrambled to grab the IVs.

"Where the fuck is Damian?" Rainy roared as he tore through the house.

Pierre motioned Sofia aside as the mad rush went through the house to the garage.

"I want to go, Pierre," she said, following.

"Yes, please come," the brunette urged. "I don't know how you know this, but I stopped asking questions awhile ago. C'mon."

The men piled into two Tahoes, and the woman led her to a small Honda. Pierre crammed himself into the backseat.

"I'm Linda," the brunette said.

"Sofia."

They were quiet the remainder of the trip while Sofia dwelled over what she'd seen in Traci's future.

What was Damian doing? Why had he sent her, and where the hell was he? She knew he could heal people. Was he that busy?

She hung back as they entered the hospital and watched the emergency room personnel take Traci. Linda flashed her a strained smile that made her feel welcome for the first time in a week before the pretty brunette gave the blond man, Lon, a hug and kiss. He relaxed visibly with her in his arms.

They waited. Rainy paced, flung himself into a chair, paced again. She didn't like seeing someone else suffer the way she did every time she thought of Cody or Jake or others dying. She approached him. His gaze raked over her.

"Rainy," she said, clearing her throat. "Traci's going to be okay."

"How the fuck would you know?"

"I just do."

"Who *are* you?" he demanded, approaching her so quickly she backpedaled. His jaw ticked, and his fists were clenched. She cringed away from him as her knees hit a chair. He was ready to snap, and she didn't want to be the first one he took out when he did.

"Careful," Pierre warned from nearby.

"Down, boy," Ving said, taking his arm.

"The babies are okay, too," Sofia added. They all froze, and a look of surprise crossed Rainy's stormy features.

"The *what?*" he demanded.

She said nothing, realizing she'd told him something he didn't know.

"Sofia found the internal bleeding. If I were you, I'd listen to her. Traci will be fine. Sit your ass down," Linda said, planting her small form between them and physically pushing the man who towered over her.

To Sofia's surprise, Rainy obeyed, though he sat across the room and stared at her. She curled up in a chair, afraid to move too quickly under the tense Guardian's gaze. A doctor emerged soon after, hesitating as his gaze swept over the room full of massive, bristling men, until Linda came forward.

"Are you next of kin?" he asked.

"More or less," she said with a smile.

"Come with me."

"Sofia." Linda waved her over. Rainy started to his feet as she rose, and she stopped.

"Dude, chill," Lon said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Pierre drew nearer, and Linda waved her forward again. Sofia went, trailing them down a hall with antiseptic-laced air to an open bay with beds separated by curtains. Traci was alone at the far end of the bay.

"She'll be all right. We had a scare there, but she pulled through. We've stopped the bleeding. She'll have to remain here for a couple of days."

"Thank God," Linda breathed. "And ... uh, her babies are okay?"

"She's in the early stages of pregnancy, no more than eight weeks. We'll be watching for signs of trauma. It'll be another two weeks before I'll feel comfortable imaging her uterus to see the fetus."

Sofia listened as she approached Traci's bed and gazed down at the unconscious woman. The woman was hooked to a ventilator and IVs, her battered face clean and pale. The doctor left, and Linda joined her.

"Czerno is a monster," Sofia whispered.

"He is," Linda said. "Lon-- my husband-- has had his own run-in with Czerno."

"So have I," she said. She felt Linda's gaze.

"It's why they do what they do, to protect humanity from that fate."

At her curious look, Linda continued.

"Their war, it's been going on for thousands of years. Damian is their leader. Lon says he's not ... normal, if you'd call any of them normal. I guess D is something less normal than my Lon. Anyway, the war between Czerno and D is for the fate of us puny humans," Linda explained.

"Why would creatures like them bother?" Sofia asked.

"I don't know, but I'm glad they do. I've only met Damian once, when he saved Lon's life after Czerno chewed him up and spit him out. His men worship him. He's helped all of them somehow, though he terrified me the time I did meet him."

"He has that effect on people," Sofia said dryly.

"Are you one of the Naturals, like Traci?"

"Not really."

"Is she having boys?" Linda asked.

"Girls, two of them."

"Rainy with two girls? No way! He'll be inconsolable," Linda said with a delighted laugh.

Sofia smiled and looked at the pretty woman beside her. There was a natural sense of cheerfulness to her that she liked.

"May I ... could you shake my hand?" she asked lamely.

Linda's brow furrowed, but she held out her hand. Sofia gripped it, the touch enough to reveal a future like Traci's, filled with love and joy.

"Am I pregnant, too?" Linda teased. "That's an awesome pregnancy test, by the way."

"No, you're not," Sofia answered with a smile. "You will be soon."

Linda grinned. "We better get Rainy in here before he tears down the hospital looking for her."

"I'm not staying. He's an inch away from wringing my neck," Sofia said, following. Her stomach growled.

"You wanna get some food?"

Sofia bit her lip and crossed her arms, unable to admit she couldn't really eat. "Sure."

Linda sent Rainy to Traci and walked with her to the cafeteria. Pierre trailed them at a distance just out of earshot, and Linda looked at her curiously.

"He's wearing the color of the bodyguards," she observed. "You must be someone important."

"Not really. I'm a lost sheep," Sofia said.

"Strange. You seem to know what you're doing."

"I'm ... new to Damian's organization. One week new, to be exact. I don't really know which way is up right now."

"Wow, Sofia. First, welcome, and congrats! These are the finest men you'll find anywhere," Linda grinned.

"Thanks."

"Second, who's your sponsor?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, no one gets in without a reason. Someone brought you in," Linda said wisely. They sat at a table near the windows.

"Why did they bring you in?" Sofia asked.

"Lon found me. I'm a Natural. I have the ability to levitate things."

"Really? Like anything?"

"Yep."

"So, if Lon said something stupid to you, you could toss him into the air and leave him there until he agreed to treat you with an ounce of respect. And if he didn't, you could leave him there and do whatever the hell you wanted for the day?" Sofia asked with more emotion than she intended. Linda looked at her, and she cleared her throat, anger spiraling through her again.

"I guess I'd never thought of that," Linda admitted, a smile pulling up the corners of her mouth. "But yeah, I could do that."

Sofia watched her take a bite of a muffin, at once longing and agitated. She was hungry. After her explosion at Damian, she'd have to beg for food. And she'd never demean herself to that man. She'd just have to starve to death.

"I do understand how frustrating this all seems when you first join," Linda went on. "Well, you don't really *choose* to join."

"You're telling me," Sofia said with emotion. "One day I'm normal. The next, I can't stand daylight and Damian is beating down my door."

"Damian?" Linda's amazement increased. "Damian's your sponsor?"

She nodded.

"I *totally* have to tell Lon. Hold on a sec." Linda whipped out a phone to text Lon. "You have no idea how special you are if D is your sponsor. Or how lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yeah, sure. He's dreamy, runs his own um, business, and he's got, like, Superman powers. He's like a modern-day king who's in charge of the superheroes trying to beat down the evil villains."

Sofia recalled how much her first meeting with him had scared her. His aura of power, his command and confidence, the sense that-- whatever he was-- he was something humankind wasn't prepared to face.

"He's just a good guy," Linda continued. "He's been after bad guys for thousands of years, and he's never gone to the Dark Side or quit or anything. That says a lot for someone, you know? He's good to his men. Lon and the others adore him. I like him, even if he scares me."

This world is so fucked up I don't know why I bother. His cranky words echoed in her thoughts, and she smiled to herself. No one but her saw the other side of Damian.

"They do so much to help people," Linda said, looking down as her phone dinged. "Lon doesn't believe me. Oh, well. Where is Damian?"

"I'm definitely not his keeper," Sofia said with a shrug.

The sun peeked over the horizon, reminding her that she'd gotten only a few hours of bad sleep. Linda texted back and forth with her husband for a few minutes.

"Traci's awake. I'll be right back," she said, hopping up.

Sofia gazed out the window, mulling over the night. She began to suspect Damian sent her there so she could meet the other women dragged into his organization. Or maybe he just wanted her out of the house so he could kill the traitors.

Oh, ye of little faith, he said into her mind.

"I hate that," she answered.

I know.

"What do you want, Damian?"

I owe you an apology.

"Well, man up and do it in person."

"A little testy today, aren't we?"

She jumped, watching as he folded himself into the small chair across from her. His scent made her heart quicken and her drowsiness dissipate. Her breath caught as she gazed at him, and she looked for any sign he was still angry at her. His golden eyes were calm, his large frame relaxed with the feline grace that made her hormones wild. His power was checked but his unusual presence enough to draw the looks of those around them. Most moved away quickly, sensing there was something about him that just wasn't normal.

His gaze was trained on her with an intensity that made her body warm from the inside out.

"Well?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Sofia, for being a dick."

"Apology accepted," she said and looked down. "I'm so sorry about Claire. I knew it would hurt you."

"No worries." His aloof response made her look up. His gaze was wary and moving, and he was guarded once more. Even after thousands of years he was reliving the pain of his brother's death. If she closed her eyes, she'd see the home video of Darian's funeral pile. Her heart went out to him. "I think I'd known for a long time and didn't want to face it. I probably could have gone much longer ignoring her."

"She would have killed you."

"She would have *tried*."

"You can risk your life, but I won't," Sofia retorted.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you cared."

"I do care about you, Damian, even though you're a total jackass," she said.

"For the record, you're the only person in history who could get away with half the shit you say," he told her.

"I know."

The warmth of his smile was not lost on her, and she thought about what Linda had said about him. Maybe the cheerful woman was right-- maybe there was more to Damian than she gave him credit for.

"D." It was Lon, whose gaze went to her as he approached.

"Morning, Lon," Damian said and twisted to face the Guardian.

"Guess I lost that bet," he muttered. "She's okay and says thanks. The doc can't figure out what happened. He should release her today."

"Glad I could help."

"Rainy would have come, but he won't leave her side. Poor sap."

"No worries. How's Linda?" Damian asked.

"Good. Still won't let me live down almost dying." His gaze went to her and then back to Damian expectantly. Damian ignored his hint, and Lon didn't press.

"Women are stubborn like that," Damian said.

"See you at the next barbecue?" Lon asked, holding out his hand.

"Wouldn't miss it," Damian said and stood to shake his hand.

"Linda says you can call her whenever you want," Lon said, handing Sofia a tissue with a phone number and smiley face written on it.

"Thanks." She watched him go then turned to her bodyguard. "Pierre, you want my croissant?"

"I do," Damian said and snatched the pastry.

"It's because I'm French, isn't it? You assume we French all eat croissants," Pierre complained.

"This is sooooo good," Damian said, pinning her with a look as he wolfed down the second half.

"Just when I start to like you ... you know, it's amazing even a man who's *thousands* of years old can act like a twelve-year-old. Pierre. Car. Now." She glared at him. Furious, she stood and breezed past him, not surprised when he opted not to ride home with her.

She didn't see Damian until afternoon, when he strolled into the library from sparring, ear to a cell phone. He was naked from the waist up and sweaty, a combination that made her sit up and pay attention.

"I don't know what she's talking about," he said with a grimace and handed the phone to her before striding out.

"Hello?" she took the phone and asked curiously.

"Hi Sofia, this is Linda! How are you?"

"Good, thanks. Everything all right?"

"Oh yeah. I was telling D that Rainy went off the deep end when we told him about the girls!" She giggled. "Traci told him not to think about asking her to marry him just because she's pregnant, and he said she had *no* choice and he'd drag the priest to her. He almost beat down her door. They're in this horrible tiff right now."

"Wow, I didn't mean to start this," Sofia said.

"The doc would have noticed she was pregnant, just not the twin part and the girls part."

"Right. Totally *not* my fault then."

Linda laughed. "Listen, I wanted to see if you wanted to go Christmas shopping with us this weekend. It's one of the last weekends before Christmas. I'm way behind, and Traci-- "

Since when did the concept of Christmas shopping seem so bizarre?

Since I became some sort of recently resurrected fortune-telling vampire. It was something normal people did during this time of year, something she'd done every year for twenty-three years.

"-- count you in?" Linda asked.

Sofia covered the speaker. "Pierre, am I allowed to go Christmas shopping?"

"I hate this fucking library," he responded.

"Is that a yes?"

"*Oui*."

"Linda, I'll go."

"Great! We'll pick you up. Are you at D's?" Linda asked.

"Yeah."

"Traci's been there. She'll drive. We'll see you Saturday at nine."

"Great, thanks." Sofia hung up the phone, feeling as if she were emerging from a stupor for the first time in months. While she couldn't shake the sense of doom that followed her from the visions, she felt more normal, less afraid, at the thought that she'd be rejoining the rest of humanity for a shopping trip with the girls, even if only for a morning.

She left the library to return Damian's phone. It rang loudly in the hall, a rap song spitting F-bombs that made her eyebrows rise. She hesitated then answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello? Do I have D's number?" a warm, male voice on the other end said.

"Yes."

"And who are you?"

"Sofia. Who are *you*?"

There was a pause before the man on the other end answered. "Jule, a friend of his. I'm in town right now on an errand."

"Are you a good friend?" she asked.

"I'd like to think so," he said with a chuckle. "We met when he was a teen and went through some rough stuff together."

"Yeah, I know. His is a sordid history. What kind of a person was he when you met?"

"He's always been the best man I know," was the unhesitant response. His voice held an upbeat note and natural warmth that she liked. He wasn't like Dustin, who seemed more likely to kill a stranger than talk to one.

"If you all are on the side of good, why is there so much death?" she demanded.

"Trust me, there'd be more if the bad guys won. It's not easy being the good guy, and it's a job not many people can do. You have to stay true to your values while destroying something as well. It's rough," he said and gave a surprised laugh.

Damian trotted from the stairs toward the courtyard and paused, looking at her curiously.

"I'm having an issue reconciling the two," she admitted.

"Who?" Damian mouthed. She waved him away.

"We've all gone through that stage. You have to look at it like this: would you want someone to help you if something bad happened?" Jule continued.

"Yes."

"Exactly. But not everyone can do what we do, because we're, well, different than normal people. We're in a unique position to help people who can't help themselves against bad guys who want to hurt them," he said.

"I see. You have no regrets?" she asked, unconvinced.

"No way in hell, and neither does D. Because of us, many innocent people have been able to live their lives, and humanity thrives," Jule said with conviction she envied.

Damian watched her, eyes narrowing.

"I see why he likes you," she said quietly. "Thanks for talking to me. He'll call you back."

"Sofi--" Jule started to object.

She hung up and tossed Damian the phone.

"I'm going shopping Saturday," she told him. "And Jule called. He's in town."

"That's who you were talking to?" Damian demanded. She didn't miss the way he bristled but turned her back to him to return to the library.

"Yep. He's a good guy."

Don't answer my phone.

"Then stop doing that!"

No deal.

He drove her crazy, and she was hungry again. Always, always hungry. Was she destined to spend the rest of her life starving?

"Your drug dealer's still in business. For now."

"That's not funny," she said, turning to glare at him.

"No?" he asked, approaching her with a languid walk that stirred her blood.

He stopped in her personal zone, too close, but she wasn't about to back down this time. She crossed her arms and looked up at him, meeting his steady look with a challenging one of her own.

"You're getting braver, *kiri*," he said in a husky tone.

She tried not to let it affect her but suspected by his look of satisfaction that he saw how quickly her face changed colors.

"If you're half the man everyone tells me you are, you'll send Han some flowers. He's going to break his leg tomorrow."

"At your service, Oracle."

She ached to touch him but refused, hugging herself more tightly instead. Her nerve began to frazzle. She walked away.

"Sofia." There was a serious note in his voice that made her stop. His gaze was on her chest. She fingered the necklace there.

"The diamonds were a bit overwhelming for daily wear," she admitted. "I restrung it onto one of my chains."

He said nothing, and she saw the look that crossed his face, as if he wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Is that okay?" she asked.

"Very." He spun on his heel and left. She watched him go, admiring and puzzled.

"My dear Han, you were right about these damn moods," she said in the empty hallway. He was worse than a woman PMSing.

You're full of shit, he said into her thoughts.

She gritted her teeth, hating the fact he had open access to her thoughts and worse-- he could *respond* to them!

"No," Pierre said, blocking the library as she approached. "I'm not wasting any more of my time in there."

"I have one more thing to do," she said, holding up her list. "Why don't you go spar? I promise not to leave."

He gave her a look of supreme distaste before he, too, walked away.

What was it with these men and their moods? She shook her head and returned to the library. In truth, it was the one place in the house where she felt safe and comfortable when she wasn't with Damian.

CHAPTER TEN

Claire didn't look any worse for wear after a day in the offsite location Dusty had scouted as a temporary dungeon for their prisoners. If not for the worried flicker of her gaze past him to see who followed, Damian would have thought this a social call.

"Dusty's not here," he said, irritated by the inference that *he* was somehow someone to be less feared.

"I guess I should feel honored to have your personal attention," she said acidly.

She sat on one of two fold-out chairs in the concrete room, legs crossed and hands in her lap. He pulled up the other chair and sat across from her.

"Two hundred and sixty three," he started. "That's the number of Guardians you've killed directly with your actions over the past few thousand years. In an organization of less than five thousand, that's a lot."

"I offered to become your queen after Darian died," she replied. "You threw me out with nowhere to go after the man who was meant to be my husband was killed. Who do you think paid the bills if you didn't?"

"I'm not sure how betraying everything your husband stood for would excuse anything you did. You're a pretty twisted bitch."

Her eyes narrowed. Damian regarded her coolly, unwilling to let someone so undeserving get the best of him. When he wanted, he could be as cold as Dusty.

"You'd never understand," she replied.

"You're right. I'd never kill my mate or sell myself to Czerno."

"It's that bitch, isn't it?" she exclaimed, rising and pacing. "*I* was meant to be at your side, not her!"

Damian felt something cool further within him at the reference to Sofia.

"You were meant to be at *Darian's* side. Your skills as an Oracle were terrible, but he would've mated with you anyway," he corrected her.

She shook her head as if *he* were the fool.

"Will you tell me why you betrayed him before I kill you?" he asked with calmness at odds with the storm in his breast.

Claire glanced away then back at him, taking in the resolve on his face. Suddenly she was mewling, kneeling beside him, her hands on his thigh and her face soft and beguiling.

Like the night she'd come to visit him upon arriving in Tucson. Damian gritted his teeth, remembering how tempted he'd been by the same ruse a few nights before.

"Forgive me, Damian. What I did was wrong," she whispered. There were tears in her eyes, and she looked sincere.

She killed Darian.

Damian stood and moved away, emotions roiling. How could someone so treacherous have lived under his nose for thousands of years? How had he ever turned a blind eye to her? He touched her mind for the first time ever, and his resolve solidified at the images he saw there.

She'd never loved Darian and had used him to gain his title and power. Her betrayal struck him even harder.

"It doesn't matter, Claire," he whispered. "You killed my brother and two hundred sixty-three other Guardians."

She rose and dusted off her legs from where she'd knelt. Her eyes flashed with defiance, and she glowered at him.

"You've had tens of thousands of years to get rid of me. You can't tell me you never looked into my thoughts with your god-powers!" she snapped.

"I didn't," he said. "I promised Darian."

"Even when we were fucking?"

"Even when we were fucking," he said evenly. "I have honor, Claire."

"Tell me, Damian, does she fuck the way you like it? Can she do for you what I did?"

"Leave her out of this, Claire." His growl was inhuman, a warning she didn't heed.

"I was meant to be at your side, not some stupid *human!*"

"There's no chance of that now, is there? I don't even expect to let you live tonight."

As if finally realizing her game was called, she hesitated then said, "I'll tell you everything you want to know about Czerno."

"I want to know why you killed my brother." Damian managed to get the difficult words out through clenched teeth.

She appeared pensive and shrugged. "I don't remember anymore."

Fury lit his insides as he regarded her easy dismissal for one of the most painful events of his life. Worse-- he saw in her mind that what she said was true. She didn't remember, and she didn't care.

"Damian," she purred, approaching him and resting her hands on his chest. "I'll tell you everything you don't know about Czerno in exchange for my life. I swear, I'll tell you all and disappear."

Her touch was like poison! He glared down at her, looking for some sign of the woman he'd thought she was.

"I don't give a fuck about Czerno, Claire. I loved Darian. I love Sofia. At one point, I think I loved you, too."

"We can--"

He pushed her away from him and drew a deep breath, withdrawing a pistol from the small of his back.

"You're a *traitor.*" He spit the word. "You've killed so many, and I've been too afraid to see you for what you are. Tonight, you're nothing to me."

She stared at him, her surprise the first genuine emotion he'd seen. He gathered his power and sent it toward her, wrapping it around her tightly.

"Claire, your immortality is revoked."

"Damian, don't!" she shouted as the invisible hands lifted her and stripped her of her immortal gift. They dropped her to the floor. She scrambled up and stared at him, terrified.

Damian took aim with the pistol and fired into her heart before she could make another sound. She dropped. He stood over her, watching the life fade from her eyes. Images of his brother played through his thoughts, images of Claire's father presenting her to Darian, of their visible love, of Darian's death, of his own involvement with Claire ...

The images hit fast and hard, even as he exited the compound and destroyed it with a flash of power. He stood and watched it burn, feeling as if a part of him burned with it.

A part of him did. What was left of Darian went up in the second funeral pile in his honor. Damian closed his eyes to the heat and light, tormented by his brother's death and his own cowardice.

Forgive me, brother.

* * *

Miles away, Sofia couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong with Damian. His mind was closed, his home videos playing too faintly for her to hear. Whatever he was going through, he was doing his best to block her.

"C'mon, *kiri,*" Dustin said, poking his head into the library.

She unraveled herself from her favorite chair near the window. Dark had fallen an hour before. She pocketed her list and trailed him to the area just beyond the patio, where the scent of hot dogs and s'mores greeted her long before she reached the small group circled around a bonfire. Linda and Traci were there. She hid a smile at the look on Linda's face. The brunette stood between Traci and Rainy, as if she were trying to broker a peace deal between two warring countries.

Traci was stunning, from her supermodel body to her delicate, elfin features. Her arms were crossed, and though she smiled at Lon, Sofia could see her level of comfort was equal to hers among the giants that towered even above a supermodel.

Relief flooded Linda's features as she saw Sofia. She hurried from between the two warring factions and hugged her. Sofia forced herself not to recoil, afraid to touch anyone.

"I'm glad you're here," Linda whispered. "This is *awful*."

Sofia felt Rainy's hard gaze but avoided his heated look.

"Traci, come here!" Linda called, flashing a smile. The supermodel all but bolted from the midst of the male forest around her. "This is Sofi. She saved your life."

Traci's hand fluttered to her stomach, and Sofia's face flamed.

"I'll get you some food," Linda said, bouncing away.

"She's so sweet," Traci murmured as she left. "I'd go crazy here if not for her."

"I completely understand," Sofia said.

"Linda says you're newer than me. This world will screw with your mind."

"Yeah."

An awkward quiet fell, and she sensed Traci was as reserved as she was. Linda returned with two hotdogs and handed one to each of them.

"You have to eat for three now, Traci," she said cheerfully.

"There goes that modeling career," Traci whispered. Sofia pitied the beautiful woman as a stricken look crossed her features.

Pierre walked by and snatched Sofia's hotdog. She was grateful; the scent was both nauseating and infuriating. Linda eyed him.

"She doesn't eat," he called over his shoulder.

"You're not starving yourself, are you?" Linda asked, turning to her in concern.

"She's blood bound," Pierre supplied, unasked.

Sofia glared at him, her embarrassment deepening at the look the men around the fire gave her. Any hope she'd had of them not understanding how different she was died. Their looks ranged from amazement to surprise to Dustin's look of disapproval aimed at Pierre.

"What does that mean?" Traci asked.

"It means, she doesn't eat," Dustin said, coming to her rescue. "Why don't you all sit down? Grande, Lon, move."

They complied, and the three women sat in lawn chairs.

"Do you eat s'mores?" Linda prodded, handing her the plate going around.

"Lin, we'll talk about it later," Lon told her softly. "Just skip the food."

Did they think she was a freak? She couldn't tell. Linda was too easygoing to be affected by much of anything, and the men seemed more surprised than anything else.

It's the greatest honor to be bound to a man like Damian. Han's words returned, and she forced herself to relax. No matter what anyone else thought, it was her reality. It must not have been totally unheard of if they all understood what it was.

"How long have you been a part of this insanity?" she asked Linda.

"Two years, or just under. It's kinda neat to know we're helping save the world from bad guys."

"You seem pretty happy," Traci observed. "Maybe in two years ..."

Sofia saw her pain and couldn't help but empathize.

"He loves you," she said quietly. "I saw it in his face when he almost killed me for being anywhere near you."

Traci's gaze flew to her. There was turmoil in her pale blue eyes.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" she asked, one eyebrow arching. "I'll make his life a living hell if so."

Sofia shook her head.

"Jackass," she muttered.

Sofia exchanged a look with Linda, and the chipper woman took the hint.

"You guys excited about shopping Saturday? I have a few places picked out already. This has to be my favorite time of year, and the one time Lon promises not to dissect our credit card bills."

"Yeah, I can think of some places I'd like to go," Traci said. "I've been living in the bachelor pad with the guys for three months now. I definitely need some girl stuff."

"We'll totally load up. Rainy will have to get used to pink stuff being everywhere."

"That he will," Traci said with a small smile.

"Are there more of us?" Sofia asked Linda.

"Naturals mated with Guardians?" Linda grinned. "Yep. We have our own support group. I'll send you the link to our online forum. There aren't many of us, and we're all over the world, but we're really close-knit. We have to be. Who else can you tell about your husband beheading five vamps?"

"I can't believe all this," Sofia said with a surprised laugh. "It doesn't seem real."

"Hon, it's as real as it gets," Linda assured her. "You'll have to make some sacrifices, but it's worth it." Her adoring gaze went to Lon. Sofia exchanged an understanding look with Traci.

"Maybe in two years ..." Traci said again.

"Can you have cocoa?" Linda asked.

"Nothing."

"I don't understand what blood bound is," Traci said.

Sofia took a deep breath. "Well, Czerno's henchmen killed me. Damian brought me back, but I can't live without ... his blood. I need it instead of food."

"How romantic!" Linda exclaimed.

"I don't really think of it that way," Sofia said, eyeing her. "It kinda hurt getting killed, and it really sucks not being able to eat food."

"It is romantic," Traci agreed. "What a wonderful story."

"You think so? You don't think it's crazy?"

"No!" they said simultaneously.

"Sofi, none of us are normal. Maybe in the human world, it'd be totally insane. I don't mean that in a mean way," Linda said quickly. "But you have a new family now, and it doesn't sound crazy to me at all. It sounds like a fairytale."

Traci was gazing at her intently. Sofia saw the tears form in her gaze.

"Excuse me," Traci said, standing. "Sofia, is there a restroom?"

"I'll show you," Sofia said.

"We'll be back," Traci promised Linda.

They walked toward the house, reaching the patio before Traci started crying. Sofia stood helplessly for a long minute.

"I'm sorry. Maybe it's my hormones. Or maybe I'm just not ... this is so unreal!"

"Pierre, go please," Sofia said, knowing he'd be there when she turned. "I'm not going past the bathroom."

He moved away without returning to the group.

"Come on," she said, placing a hand on Traci's arm. She guided the crying woman inside to her library and dug through the small satchel near her favorite chair. "I've been crying for a week straight. I've figured out which tissues are the softest."

Traci choked on a half-laugh, half-sob and accepted the packet of tissues. She sat down, sobbing her heart out, and Sofia sat near her. God, how she understood the uncertainty and confusion Traci felt!

"You again."

She turned at Rainy's voice. His green eyes shifted from her to Traci. Sofia hesitated before standing. She left them alone and returned to the group, deep in thought. The growing night chill had driven Linda into Lon's arms, and she relaxed near the fire. The men spoke among

themselves, swapping war stories and discussing the Tucson Sector's influx of vamps. They ignored her, and she rested her head on the back of the chair, their low talk and the warmth of the fire lulling her into another trance.

Images flowed behind her eyelids, most too fleeting to catch. Damian's home videos played, intertwined with those of others, until a wave of power washed over her. She jerked upright. The Guardians had frozen in mid-speech and were looking toward the mansion.

"Don't worry about it," Dustin said, his eyes locked on the house. "He's had a rough day."

Their gazes lingered before they returned to their conversations. Sofia glanced at Dustin and stood, concerned. Damian was not one to lose control. If he had, something horrible had happened. She closed her eyes, searching for the home videos. Visions of his brother.

Claire's death.

Stop.

His command was so sharp she jumped. She felt more compelled to him now than ever before.

"Sofia," Dustin called as she stepped toward the house. "*Kiri*, you've never seen him like this."

"He needs me," she said.

He searched her gaze and pursed his lips but lifted his chin toward the house.

"Pierre, stay," he ordered.

"*I'm* not going in there," Pierre assured him, earning him another look of disapproval.

The sense of power increased tenfold as she entered the mansion. The lights were on, but shadows crawled from the corners and choked the lights until they were shriveled, glowing orbs. The shadows clung to her as she stepped into the hallway. They moved like smoke, shifting and swirling as they crawled the walls. They formed a fog at her feet and trailed her toward the stairwell.

She swallowed hard. Damian needed her. Shadows chased her up the stairs and flew down the halls, coating the floors and walls in shallow, black fog. The power swirling in the air around her grew as she neared Damian's door, and she was reminded of the tension in the air before a thunderstorm. Only this was equal to a hundred thunderstorms.

She didn't know what Damian was, but he was beyond Superman powerful.

Leave. His command reached her as she opened his suite door. He stood on the balcony, visible beyond the transparent curtains rustling in the moving haze. She hesitated before moving forward again.

"Sofia." The warning in his voice was plain. His whisper reached her across the room.

"No," she told him.

Fear unfurled in her breast, and she clenched her fists. Shadows crawled over the world around her, and the tension in the air made it hard to breathe. The hair on her arms and neck stood up. She'd never seen him not in control. His powers were quiet and exploring, crawling over the physical world.

The air around him was even harder to breathe. Her breaths quickened, and her heart pounded.

"You need me," she managed.

"I need *nothing* from this world!" he said with an undertone that was purely inhuman. His fury, pain, and sorrow choked her. Her eyes watered at the soul-wrenching emotions. She'd never felt pain like his!

"Damian."

He whirled and stalked toward her, his face a mask of fury. She sidestepped him and retreated until the balcony railing trapped her. He planted his hands on either side of her and lowered his face to her level. His presence was overwhelming, and her body reacted with both terror and lust so strong it made her head spin.

His eyes were black, fathomless, the eyes of a god among men.

"Tell me, Seer, what do you See?" he rasped in the inhuman voice.

Her breaths came in short gasps, but she refused to back down. She belonged to his world as much as he did. She belonged to *him*.

"I see a man who just lost the last connection to someone he loved to his soul," she whispered.

The burst of furious power shot through her, the shockwave rattling the windows of the house. She closed her eyes. An eerie quiet followed, and she wasn't sure if he'd shed his human body and take out her and everything else.

She opened her eyes when nothing happened, shaking from both cold and fear. Damian's head was bowed, his tense body still. Compelled to him like nothing else in the world, she touched his face with a quivering hand. He was still for a long moment before he nuzzled it. She raised the other hand to his other cheek, sensing his resistance. A moment later, it melted, and he embraced her. She wrapped her arms around him, at home again.

"I was getting ready to destroy the world."

Cold fear trickled through her. He wasn't joking.

"Good thing I felt hungry tonight," she said.

"You were right. I was a coward," he said after a moment. "My brother loved her with all his soul. She was all I had left of him."

She listened, struck by the sorrow in his voice.

"Such is the weakness of a man," he added bitterly.

"You're not weak, Damian," she said, propping her chin on his chest to look up at him. "I've seen your soul, you know."

"It serves me right. I've been spying on the thoughts of humanity for thousands of years. Guess it's my turn."

"I'm glad you didn't destroy the world," she whispered.

"For the record, you're fucking crazy. I could have killed you."

"It's the least I could do. You're there for me when I need you," she said. "Even if your attitude sucks."

He chuckled hoarsely and spread butterfly kisses across her forehead, hugging her against him even tighter. She loved being in his arms!

"My sweet, pain in the ass Oracle. Looks like it was a good idea bringing you back from the dead after all."

"That's the worst thing you've ever said to me!" she cried, offended.

She felt the tension within him melt, and the restless shadows wrap around her, cocooning them before retreating. She'd never felt a surrender like his. His guard was down for the first time since she'd known him. The idea of him being vulnerable to anyone floored her. From his home videos, he'd never lowered his guard to anyone, even Claire. Awed by the power she had over him, she began to understand the extent of his solitary existence for the millennia of his life. He'd known love and trust only in the earliest stage of his life, when he had a family before he entered the dark age of his people. He'd been alone since, except for his two adopted brothers. He'd never been able to share his pain with anyone else.

Her stomach growled.

"So you *are* hungry."

"I'm always hungry," she grumbled.

"Can't get enough of me."

Jackass.

He drew away from her, and she met his black gaze. Hot desire flowed through her and was mirrored on his face. His gaze was direct, just short of demanding. She took a step back.

He offered his wrist, and she knew he was offering much more. She shook her head, mouth too dry to speak. She wanted him, God did she want him!

"When I'm ready to destroy the world, you waltz in like it's nothing. When it's just *us*, you run. How does that work, Sofia?" he challenged in a husky tone.

It was one thing to offer her body, but her heart, her soul ... he would take all of her, consume her completely, irrevocably. She stood on a ledge, considering a swan dive into the depths of the universe. As much as she wanted him, *needed* him, she was terrified to take the final step that would make her his for eternity.

"It's okay, *kiri*," he said, softening. He touched her hair. "Come to me tomorrow morning. I'm not yet in control of myself."

She was more grateful to him in that moment than she'd ever been. She took his hand and kissed his palm, then ran to her library, mind racing with what she'd learned about him.

* * *

Damian listened to the door close behind her, stunned by what he'd seen in her thoughts. Love. Pure, sweet, unconditional. For *him* of all things! He'd heard it in her thoughts even if she didn't speak the words, and her ability to see through him as he did everyone else amazed him.

He'd never thought much of that talent, the ability to see into someone. He'd always found something wrong, something evil or bad, no matter how small the inclination. Except in her.

"Brother, come out of the shadows," he said, weariness in his voice.

"I wouldn't intrude."

"Bullshit. You were making sure I didn't hurt her."

Dusty said nothing but drew abreast of him.

"Thank you," he said and leaned again on the railing. "I hope you'd have kicked my ass if I did."

"Puh-lease, brother. What makes you think I didn't follow to make sure she didn't chicken out?" Dusty challenged.

"Glad she passed your test. She probably doesn't realize what happens to people who don't."

"We'll keep it that way."

Damian chuckled despite himself, unable to shake the negative emotions running through him. He felt both spent and wired, his head too full of memories to control.

"Are you okay?" Dusty asked.

"I am now," he replied. He drew a ragged breath.

"I don't want a woman, but if I did, I'd want one like *kiri*," Dusty admitted. "I saw the way she looked at you. D, *I'm* in love with her."

"She's a lot like you."

"I don't cry that much."

"She's got your lip," Damian teased.

Dusty rolled his eyes. Damian regarded him, reminded again how fortunate he was to have friends like his. Dusty met his gaze with his clear blues, concerned and relieved.

"It's been a good week. We found an Oracle, executed some traitors, chased down bad guys, hosted the Quarterly, and are evac-ing soon."

"Just when I start to get bored with life," Damian agreed. "Jule's missed most of it."

"Serves him right. He forgot my birthday *again*."

"What is it with you and your birthdays? Every year you bitch about it," he said, enjoying the distraction from his dark thoughts.

"I like my birthdays," Dusty said defensively. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"If you say so. I don't even know when mine is."

"July twenty-seventh on the current calendar. Jule's is November third."

"You've got issues, bro."

"Fuck you, Damian," Dusty said in irritation. "It's the little things that count."

Damian shook his head, comforted by the little Oracle and his adopted brother.

"You did the right thing," Dusty said. "Give yourself a break and get some rest."

He slapped him on the arm and disappeared. Damian gazed at the dark landscape. Sleep was as far from his mind as possible. He thought instead of Claire and Sofia. At one point after his brother's death, he'd considered making Claire his queen. Respect for his brother's memory stopped him. In hindsight, he wondered how he'd ever been fooled or why he'd settle for Claire when there was someone like Sofia out there, who'd love him for him and not for his title.

He spent the night deep in thought, forcing himself to face the dark memories he'd tried so hard to bury.

* * *

Two awoke from a dream. He sat up, sweating. He didn't remember the dream, but he saw that *kiri* was crying again.

"It's okay, *kiri*," he said.

She'd been quiet for a day or two, going everywhere with him, a companion in his head who was beyond the touch of his angry master. She was *his*, and she brought him a sense of peace.
I'm scared.

It was the first time he'd understood the words she spoke to him. Two swung his legs off the bed, holding his breath in case she spoke again. Her voice was tiny and quiet.

I'm scared.

He didn't know what to do.

"It's okay, *kiri*," he said again.

So much death in this world.

"We're not dead, *kiri*."

You are.

"I'm not dead. Are you?"

Not anymore.

He rubbed his face, his fingers slowing as he felt his scars. They were thick and gruesome, creating ridges and channels in his face. He traced his fingers over the scars on his hands and followed them up his arms, then his chest, then his legs. They were everywhere, like the mountain ranges surrounding their hideout. He didn't remember what made the scars, and he didn't realize how many there were.

"Maybe I am dead," he said, tracing the scars down to his feet.

You are.

He was breathing. He felt the pain of the last blow his master had given him before bed. His feet were cold, and he was hungry. Always hungry. Did he ever eat? He wasn't allowed to drink the juice he liked anymore.

"No, *kiri*, I am alive," he said.

He couldn't sleep when she cried. Two mechanically dressed and left his room. The halls were quiet. He walked without knowing exactly where he went. The halls narrowed and sloped, and he knew he'd been this way before even though he didn't remember when. He paused before a keypad and looked at his hand. There were three sets of numbers written in green ink on his palm. He typed the first in. The door opened and led to another keypad. He entered the second number and came to the final keypad. He typed in the last number.

The desert night was cold and dark. He looked around and found a familiar dirt trail that led to a large rock overlooking the desert he'd sat on earlier to watch the sunset.

He loved sunsets.

"Is this better, *kiri*?" he asked and sat on his cold rock.

I don't like it underground.

He had no choice. He did what his master said to do. *Kiri* was in his head. She had to do what his master said, too.

No, she retorted stubbornly.

"He will hurt you, *kiri*," he told her.

You'll protect me.

He frowned, troubled. At least his master couldn't touch her if she stayed in his head. He'd never have to worry about protecting her.

His eyes traveled from the desert to the sky. He clasped his arms behind his head and lay down, impervious to the cold. The sky was dark, the stars plentiful and bright.

"Do you like the stars?" he asked her.

Yes.

"I think I like them, too." But he wasn't sure yet.

"Slave."

Two bolted to his feet at the unfamiliar voice. The man with eyes the color of the moss in his room materialized from the shadows.

"Yes, master," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

Two looked around him. He'd found his way out, but he wasn't sure how. He looked up and recalled the stars. He stared, aware *kiri* liked them, too. When he came to see the stars or watch the sunset, she didn't cry. Maybe she didn't like it underground.

"Slave."

He jerked, surprised to find his master's friend, the one with eyes the color of the moss in his room, standing before him.

"Yes, master."

"What are you thinking?" his master's friend asked.

"Slaves don't think, master."

His master's friend moved closer, and he silently told *kiri* to be quiet, lest she be heard. She was on the verge of crying again.

"Do you like the stars?" his master's friend asked.

"Yes, we do."

His master's friend looked at him for a long minute.

"Return to your room, slave, and I won't tell your master I found you here."

"Yes, master."

Two went back to the door and looked at his hand. He didn't remember coming this way, but he was sure it was the way back. He entered three codes and crossed through three doors, walked down a hall too narrow for him to walk straight, and retreated to his room. *Kiri* began to cry again.

"Slave."

He turned when he reached his door. The master's friend, the one with eyes the color of the moss in the corner of his room, stood before him.

"Yes, master."

"You must take care of *kiri* no matter what."

The master's friend had heard her crying. Two bowed his head, awaiting a beating that never came. When he looked up, he was alone. He wondered why he was in the hallway at all and returned to his room.

"It's okay, *kiri*."

I miss the stars.

He didn't know how to leave the underground prison, or he'd take her outside to see them. Two sat down on his bed and stared into the darkness, unable to sleep when she cried.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I thought you didn't eat croissants," Sofia said, staring at her bodyguard as she awaited Linda and Traci.

Pierre received a wide berth from the Starbucks customers, his massive frame standing out even more among normal-sized humans. People stared, women in envy and hunger. Pierre was beyond handsome with his brooding looks, wind-swept blond hair, black clothing, and trench coat. He was lined with weapons she'd watched him emplace earlier. His trench coat was too heavy for her to lift by the time he finished stowing his gear.

"Of course I do. I'm French," he said and swallowed one whole. "You Americans can't get it right, though."

"At least you can eat them."

He winked and swallowed another.

"I think Pierre was right about that sweater," Linda said as she rejoined them. "I'm glad I didn't get it."

"It made you look ten pounds heavier," he reminded her.

"Black isn't supposed to do that."

"It's the material, not the color," he replied.

Traci joined them, coffee in hand, and they merged into the crowded mall. Pierre stayed on her heels, guaranteeing her a wide berth. She was grateful to him. His cell rang, and he answered, eyes always moving.

"Has it been an hour?" she asked. "I forgot my watch."

"Yeah, just about. We can make our way back there," Traci said. She looked healthier and happier than during their last two encounters, and Linda had let it slip that she and Rainy were talking again.

"That pocket is for knives, not your shit," Pierre snapped as Linda dropped another trinket she'd bought into one of his pockets.

"The key is knowing that-- if you're not a bad guy-- they can't do more than bark at you," Linda confided to Sofia and Traci.

Texting, Traci led them into the jewelry store. Sofia fingered the cell phone and credit card Damian thrust into her hands on her way out the door. He'd not said anything to her since the other night, when he'd almost destroyed the world. She fed from him silently and made every effort to avoid him in the meantime. Just thinking of him made her body heat and her heart flip. She didn't know what she felt toward him. If her Christmas gift was any indication, she thought she might be falling for the brute.

The salesperson recognized her and reappeared with a small box.

"Here is the original," he said, pulling her necklace from a small baggy. "And here is what we've done."

He opened the box to reveal a man's platinum signet ring with the half-moon, half-sun, and arrow symbol neatly carved on its head. *Damian* was engraved on the interior. She'd seen the image in his home videos. Every White God but him had worn the symbol. It was a sign of his history, of his past, and he regarded it with both yearning and regret. She didn't know if he'd welcome the gift or if his recent ordeal left him more jaded toward his past.

"Very nice," Linda said, picking it up. "This thing is big enough to fit on my toe."

"Pierre, what do you think?" Sofia asked. He'd approved all their purchases and talked them out of a few bad ones during the morning.

"*Bon*," he said with a nod of approval. "Subtle bling. He will like it."

She replaced the necklace and handed the credit card to the salesperson. In a few minutes, they were strolling through the mall once more.

"Pierre, where are you from anyway?" Traci asked, looking up at the bodyguard.

"France."

"We know that," Linda said. "*When* are you from?"

"Sixteen sixty-ish. I'm a baby in the organization."

Linda rolled her eyes.

"I don't think I'll get used to that," Traci said with a shake of her head.

Pierre's phone rang again.

"It is different, but you'll never hear such neat accounts of history as you will from these guys," Linda stated.

Sofia's phone vibrated, and she pulled it out, wondering who had her number.

Hey S, it's Jule. Come 2 fd crt.

She glanced at the signs at the nearest intersection indicating the direction of the major department stores and the food court.

"Can we go this way?" she asked, pointing.

The three moved with her, Pierre speaking tersely in French on the phone. She recognized Jule on sight and couldn't help but feel surprised. Like the assassin who obsessed about birthdays and clothing, there were two sides to the man before her: the warm, friendly stranger with whom she'd felt so comfortable she confided to him over the phone without knowing anything about him, and the tattooed thug before them in snug biker leathers. He wore an assortment of knives on his belt and a silver symbol of a star with two arrows through it that looked older than Damian's on a black choker around his neck.

He towered head and shoulders over the mostly female crowd and leaned with deceptive casualness that radiated danger against one of the pillars in the food court. His leather vest revealed arms and chest completely covered in colorful, vivid tattoos, his whole visage daring anyone to challenge him. He was the kind of man she wouldn't think twice about running from, though the intelligence gleaming in his soulful brown eyes gave him away as something more. His skin was the shade of melted chocolate, his features too exotic to discern his ethnicity, and his long, straight hair was braided down his back.

She stopped a safe distance from him, unable to reconcile the man on the phone with the man before her. He flashed a wide smile at Pierre, who lifted his chin and nudged her forward.

"Ladies. I'm Jule," he said in a gravelly growl as they neared.

"I've heard of you," Linda said, surprised. "Don't you rule the eastern hemisphere?"

"Something like that. Linda, Traci, Sofia, I presume."

He looked at the charm dangling from her necklace and held out his hand to her, palm up. She placed her hand atop his, assessing him. She saw glimpses of his shared history with Damian and Dustin and of a time before meeting them that was too dark for her to see clearly. His intense gaze remained on her.

"Pierre doing good by you?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. He's got a great sense of style," Linda said with a laugh.

"He'll do," Sofia answered.

Jule's smiles were less reserved than those of the other men despite his unfriendly appearance. The skin around his eyes softened. She saw the thaw from the cactus daring anyone to touch him to the man she'd spoken to on the phone. He took in her features with passive curiosity.

"Hey, boss," Pierre said, holding out his hand.

"Good to see you, Froggie. Enjoying your new assignment?"

"*Mon dieu, non!* I can't believe you sent me here to babysit."

Sofia gave Pierre a harried look, and Jule chuckled.

"If he's complaining, he's happy," he told her. "He's the best in my sphere of command, though Han's shoes are hard to fill."

"Han had manners," she replied.

"And you're alive because of whom?" Pierre responded.

"Glad to see you're getting along," Jule said with a grin. "Dusty warned me you were a handful, Sofi."

"Me?" she asked, surprised.

"*Oui*," Pierre agreed.

The men around her were smoking crack. She rarely left the house and lived in the library. She wasn't sure what she could do to be more boring.

"Since we're here ..." Traci said, eyes going to a Chinese buffet.

"Go ahead. We'll wait," Jule said. His gaze returned to Sofia, and she crossed her arms under his scrutiny.

"I think I'll go with her," Linda said, looking between the two.

Jule glanced at Pierre, who obeyed the silent command and moved away.

"How you holding up?" he asked.

"Better," Sofia answered.

"Reconciled things yet?"

"Working on it. Linda is putting me in contact with the support group she belongs to. I'm reading their blogs. Haven't worked up the nerve to post. I'm different, Jule, even among you all."

"That you are," he agreed. "Dusty says you stopped D from annihilating the planet. That's a good thing."

"I saw that you shared his history ..." She stopped, not sure how comfortable he was with a stranger reading his mind.

"You're definitely not gonna stress me out, okay? Just say what you need to."

"He was upset about his brother."

Jule nodded, a dark look crossing his features.

"That was a bad time for all of us," he recalled. "A very bad time. That was right after I met them, before the Schism and being paroled to earth. When it rains, it hails."

"I know."

"I'm impressed. You're doing well. I bet D didn't tell you that only ten percent of Oracles ever get as far as you have."

"No, he didn't," she said.

"Most of them kill themselves. Some go crazy. Some go crazy then kill themselves. The rest we kill when they start going crazy."

"Are you ..." She paused then plowed forward, gaze on his choker. "Are you the same kind of entity he is?"

"Sort of. We're cousins, several times removed. We both inherited our powers while Dusty was like you, a human meant for something much greater."

"We found the traitors in your hemisphere," she said, looking away.

"I know. You saved thousands of lives."

She was silent.

"Sofia." She looked up at his soft tone. His gaze was warm. "You did the right thing."

"I hope so," she replied. "I'd do anything for Damian."

"Dusty said I'd like you," he said with a smile. "He's right. You're what D needs. It's taken thousands of years, but I'm glad you finally showed up."

"Let me guess, if you didn't like me, Dustin would take me out back and kill me."

"Something like that," Jule said with a laugh. "He's really protective of the people he cares about."

"You didn't come all the way to Tucson for an errand," she said, recalling their phone conversation.

"I did not," he confirmed. He said no more, and she lost the nerve to pursue.

"I'm going for Frenchie fries," Pierre called. "You want anything, Sofi? Perhaps an American hamburger? Where are you from, Jule, so I can get you ethnically stereotypical food?"

Jule laughed, looking at her to see how she'd take it.

"That man has issues," she muttered.

"Let me guess, you asked him if he wanted a croissant?"

Jule bristled suddenly, the smile disappearing as his face turned predatory once again. Sofia watched him, surprised at the quick change.

"Pierre," he called.

Her Guardian was ramrod straight as well, sensing whatever Jule sensed. They exchanged a silent communication, and Pierre moved through the crowd toward Linda and Traci.

"C'mon, sweetheart," Jule said. "It's time for us to go."

Fear swept through her, and he offered a tight smile.

"No worries. Nothing here can get through me. I'm not D, but I'm as close as they come."

He strode beside her, whipping out his cell as they headed toward the nearest exit.

"D, it's me. We're headed back."

The sense of normalcy faded as they moved through the mall. She looked back to see if Pierre followed. He and the girls were gone, though three men in sunglasses moved purposefully toward her and Jule. She knew them for Czerno's men; if they revealed their eyes, they'd be red. She looked up at Jule. He appeared relaxed despite the danger.

"Just another day at the office," he said with one of his warm smiles.

"Will I ever get used to this?"

"Maybe someday."

A car awaited them when they exited. Jule ignored the three men trailing them and ushered her into the armored Tahoe. The driver sped away before the door closed, and she twisted around to see the three men watching them.

"They can't risk killing you," Jule said. "Or they'd have razed the whole mall. Czerno has no restraint when it comes to collateral damage."

"What does he want with me?" she asked, hands shaking.

"In our time, whoever controlled the Oracle, controlled the battle. You're a weak point for Damian, and Czerno has been waiting for him to develop an opening."

"I don't like the sound of that," she said, sitting back in her seat.

"What's done can't be undone," he said. "It's a good thing."

"Doesn't seem like it."

"But it is," he said firmly. "Oracles were rare in our time. Blood-bound Oracles your age and ability? Almost unheard of. Oracles blood bound to a man in Damian's position? Incredible. That he's chosen you as his mate will basically ensure the continued existence of life as we know it. Trust me-- it's a good thing."

"His *what*?" she exclaimed.

Jule looked at her. "Shouldn't have said that. Pretend I didn't."

"Jule, you opened this can of worms."

"And I'm closing it."

She recognized his tone; it was one Damian used when making her boundaries with him clear. She didn't like those boundaries one bit.

"You're on my shit list with Damian and Pierre," she said.

"At least I keep good company," he said with a chuckle. "Is Dusty there, too?"

"Not yet."

"I think I like you, Sofia."

She shook her head. She liked him, too, even though he was different from Damian and Dusty. He patted her leg with another of his friendly smiles and turned his attention to the world racing by them.

It was dark before they returned to the mansion. The driver had driven in circles and down every back alley he could find until Jule was confident there was no one tailing them.

Damian and Dustin awaited them. Their faces lit up at the sight of Jule, and Sofia trailed him in, watching as the three clapped each other on the shoulders and hugged. The energy around them was lively; they were brothers whose bond was formed during their years in the bowels of hell.

She closed her eyes, the home videos playing in her thoughts. These were happy images of shared exploits, battlefield victories, and tender moments crying on each other's shoulders as their world grew uglier. They touched her, and she smiled.

"Sofia," Damian said in a warning tone.

She opened her eyes to find all three gazing at her with similar guarded looks. She crossed her arms, agitated.

"Damian, Dustin, Jule, I'm an Oracle. Get used to it."

And she went to the library, their pride be damned.

* * *

"Damn Oracles," Damian said under his breath, watching her.

He wasn't sure if he should be angry at her defiant insubordination or amused by it. She was harmless to him, like a trash-talking flower. Then again, most men had *some* level of respect for him and his position. He shook his head, returning his attention to Dusty and Jule. Dusty's gaze was on the ground, his smile partially hidden while Jule's amusement was less discreet. He grinned.

"Look on the bright side," Jule said. "She's accepting her role."

"Exactly," Dusty agreed.

Damian glared at both of them, suddenly aware they were laughing at *him*.

"You'll get your turn," he assured them both. "And I'll be there to laugh at you when you do. C'mon."

He strode down the hallway to his office, his two adopted brothers following. Han had laid out a few maps on the table near his desk. Damian flipped the lights on, and the three of them gathered at the table.

"Our evac plan was to take everyone here," Dusty said, indicating a point in the Utah desert. "But we don't know how much information Claire had access to and what she passed to Czerno."

"I didn't stop to ask her," Damian said in a cold voice. Dusty and Jule knew better than to pry what happened when he confronted Claire. He'd done as he promised Jule and eliminated the threat.

"We'll evac elsewhere."

"Wouldn't recommend Europe," Jule said with a snort. "You still coming to help me clean up?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Dusty, can you run the evac and clean-up ops for Arizona?"

"Gladly."

"How 'bout Australia for the next HQ site?" Jule asked.

"Come to Florida," Dusty suggested. "We can be neighbors. I'll help you keep your woman in line."

"I'll be left out again," Jule complained.

"I'm going back to Europe with you, aren't I?" Damian asked, amused. "And I'll stay until the issue is fixed."

"Even if your Oracle remains in Florida?" Dusty challenged.

"I trust you to take care of her," Damian assured him.

"See how that works, Dusty?" Jule said with a laugh. "I think you just picked up Oracle babysitting duty."

Dusty pursed his lips, and Damian smiled. He trusted Sofia to either of the two men before him and knew Dusty was the more likely of the two to shoot first and ask questions later if she was threatened.

"So we evac tomorrow and set up HQ in Florida," he summarized. "Dusty, can you pick a site and relay it to us? I've got parish calls to make this evening. I'm going to deliver the order to

rendezvous here at 0800 in the morning for evacuations. Jule, we'll leave for the European front tomorrow."

"Awesome," Jule agreed.

"I need your computer," Dusty said.

"Like you can use one," Jule said.

"Fuck you, Jule."

Damian smiled and tossed his head toward his computer, straightening. His thoughts drifted to Sofia. He'd likely be away with Jule for quite a while. If it weren't so unsafe, he'd take her with him.

"I'm heading out to the Sector," he said. "Make yourselves at home."

Jule pulled out his phone, and Dusty sat in front of the computer. Damian strode to his room to change. As he pulled on the last of his clothes and crossed to his armory, a small, black velvet box nestled between two daggers drew his attention. He opened it, surprised to see a ring bearing the White God's seal. He'd tucked away the necklace thousands of years ago after finding it among the pieces of his brother's body. He'd never been able to bring himself to wear it.

He gazed at the ring, touched. The little Oracle knew just how to affect him. Dark memories crossed his mind, along with his resolve to finally let his brother's memory rest in the peace it deserved. With Claire's death, he'd avenged his brother and righted the wrong made thousands of years ago. He no longer needed to feel as if he still dwelt in the shadow of Darian's death. He was the king now in his own right.

He removed the ring from the box, smiling as he saw his name engraved in the interior. He went to the library, where he knew she'd be hiding out.

"Did you do this?" he demanded, holding up the ring like a piece of dirty underwear.

She jerked at his voice and twisted to face him, observing him coolly before turning away.

"Are you going out?" she asked without answering him.

"I am."

Aggravated by her second display of defiance in one night, he crossed to her and planted his hands on either side of her chair, demanding her attention. She looked up at him.

"Do you like it?" she asked, unease and desire crossing her features at his nearness.

"Yes."

"In your home videos, you're always thinking about the symbol."

"Home videos?" he echoed.

"Your memories."

Her two-toned eyes were still, her head resting on the back of the chair as she looked up at him. The sexual awareness killed him more and more lately, and he started to think going to the European front was a good thing. She'd have time and space to adjust without the added confusion of *him*.

"You shouldn't be afraid to wear it anymore," she told him.

"You see too much, Sofia," he replied gruffly.

"You keep telling me who I am. This is who *you* are, Damian."

There was a tenderness in the way she looked at him that amazed him. He felt her deep confusion of the world around her and marveled again at how selfless she still managed to be.

"Thank you, Sofia," he whispered.

She smiled at the genuine note in his voice, and he leaned forward, kissing her. If only he didn't have to tour the Sector tonight!

"We'll come back to this, *kiri*," he promised, grudgingly withdrawing.

Her eyes swirled with arousal, and her parted, plump lips threatened his resolve. She touched his face. He kissed her hand and pushed away. He left the library and traveled to one of the remaining, undiscovered safe houses at the base of one of the mountains. He placed the ring on his finger, his body buzzing with lust and anticipation. There'd been no hesitancy in her

kiss, none of her previous reserve. Lost in his thoughts, he didn't sense the danger until it spoke.

"Hello, Damian," the Black God said.

He whirled. Czerno stood at the other end of the room. Before Damian could react, a charge of electricity flew through him, carrying with it an invasive liquid that paralyzed him. Damian dropped to the floor with a roar, his eyes blurring as more fire and liquid tore through him. He struggled to free his arms from the invisible bonds, his eyesight darkening until he dropped into unconsciousness.

* * *

The sense of danger jarred her, and she sat up straight, heart pounding hard. She looked around. Something was wrong.

Damian.

She shot out of her seat and to the door, wrenching it open. She pulled out the cell he'd given her and called the only number in it.

"Jule," came the gruff answer.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"Sweetheart, I'll call you later. Stay put for now, okay?" He hung up, but there was urgency in his voice. Jule wasn't the type of man who worried about anything, and fear slid through her.

"Pierre!" she called. For the first time, he wasn't lingering in the shadows. "Dustin!"

A brief search of the house yielded neither man. She snatched her satchel and dug out Linda and Traci's numbers. She dialed each of them, distressed when both calls went to voicemail. She stopped and closed her eyes, seeking the home videos that normally streamed.

Not even the videos were playing. Coldness filled her. Something terrible would've had to happen to break the connection between Damian and her.

She went to the key locker and chose one of Damian's sports cars, her instincts urging her to go somewhere, though she didn't know where. Within minutes, she was on the road. It'd been only a week and a half since she ventured into this new world, but she felt strangely exposed without Pierre with her. Her phone rang, and she snatched it.

"Did you call?" Traci asked.

"Where's Rainy?"

"I'm not supposed to say anything."

"Please, Traci, it's important," she begged. "I know something awful happened to Damian. I can feel it!"

"Come to the Sector."

"I need the address."

"I'll text it when we hang up," Traci said.

Sofia pulled over to the side of the road to await the text and load the address into the car's GPS. She drove fast and arrived half an hour later to the safe house and parked out front. The front door was open, as if they were expecting her.

"Traci?" she called as she entered.

"In here!"

Sofia followed the sound of her voice to the living room. Traci was alone with the man she recognized as Ving, who stood near the doorway. He looked past her.

"Where's your bodyguard?" he demanded.

"I don't know," she answered.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

She edged past him. The model on the couch looked between them with a frown. She was still pale after her encounter with Czerno.

"Ving, we're going to the site," Sofia told him.

"Hell no."

"You can take us, or I can go alone," she said and crossed her arms.

"Neither of you will go anywhere," Ving said firmly. She exchanged a look with Traci.

"Very well. I'll wait for Pierre to catch up," she said, joining Traci on the couch. Ving eyed her. Sofia put her purse down and tucked her phone into her jeans.

"Stay here. I'm calling Rainy," Ving said. Sofia watched, but he didn't go far, just stepped into the hall. He could still see them.

"Traci, we gotta leave," she whispered. "You know where Rainy is?"

"Yes. You're not going alone," Traci said, hesitating. "We can't outrun him. Wait a minute."

Sofia could hardly sit still. The sense of doom was building. She needed to reach Damian, now! Traci crossed to the kitchen door just as Ving hung up the phone.

"You hungry?" Traci asked both of them. "I was just making a midnight snack. I can't stop eating."

"You're eating for three," Ving reminded her.

"I know, I know," Traci grated. "As long as I don't look it!"

"No, thanks," Sofia said. Traci disappeared around the corner to the kitchen. Sofia waited, staring blankly at the football game on TV. Ving sat beside her, and she resisted the urge to bolt for the door.

"Hey, Sofi! Linda says you make a killer grilled chicken," Traci called from the kitchen. "I got the chicken if you got the recipe!"

"Yeah, sure." It was all Sofia could do to keep from springing out of her seat. She felt Ving's gaze on her as she crossed the living room and disappeared into the kitchen. There was no backdoor in the kitchen, but Traci had wedged the window over the sink open. She waved Sofia over frantically before climbing on top of the sink and wriggling through the window. Sofia followed and dropped into the grass beside Traci.

"And now we run like hell," Traci said.

They circled the hacienda to Sofia's car and dove into it just as the front door wrenched open. Sofia started the car with shaking hands and tore away from the curb, heart pounding as she watched Ving's furious form grow smaller in the rearview mirror.

"I'm in so much trouble right now," Traci said. "Rainy's gonna be *pissed*."

"Me, too, I'm sure. Where are we going?"

"One of their safe houses was hit earlier. Rainy called to say he'd be there for a while cleaning up the mess. I've been there twice to check for signs of vamp surveillance."

"That doesn't sound good," Sofia murmured. Her phone rang. Jule's number flashed. Suspecting Ving had made a couple of hurried phone calls, she let the call go to voicemail.

"This feels weird," Traci said. "I'm used to one of them following me around like a puppy."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too. It feels good to get out, though."

She drove fast with Traci's directions guiding her. As dawn broke, they reached the turn off to the safe house. The destruction was visible long before they reached the low adobe structure hidden between the foothills of the Tucson Mountains. Dead vamps lined the driveway. Several cars were on fire, and black smoke spiraled toward the sky. Deep holes in the ground, rimmed with black, pockmarked the shallow valley. A dozen vehicles were parked near the structure, itself the size of a small warehouse. At least one of Damian's Guardians lay slain among the scores of vamps.

The adobe structure was guarded by several more Guardians, none of whom looked like Damian from the distance. She stopped the car before reaching them. The death around her disturbed her, and danger hung in the air. She closed her eyes, seeking the familiar home videos. Instead, a faint memory began to play. She saw glimpses of the early morning battle. Opening her eyes, she hesitated and moved away from the car in the direction of the source of the memories.

"Sofia," Traci called, fear in her voice.

Sofia stopped at the edge of the driveway, horrified by the bloodied and broken bodies spread across the expansive area in front of her. It looked like a war zone and smelled like a cesspool. Her chest was tight and her breath short, but she knew there was one way to find out what happened to Damian.

"Come with me," she whispered. She grabbed Traci's hand, and she picked her way through the death until she found the vamp she sought.

"Sofia!" Dustin's voice was filled with fury.

She knelt beside the vamp. While he looked dead, he was alive enough for his memories to reach her. She braced herself and touched him. The night's battle lit up her thoughts, and what she saw made her gasp.

Czerno himself had been there for the well-timed ambush. He and his vamps had fought half the night and created the battlefield full of destruction before the dozen Guardians assigned to the safe house were overwhelmed. Damian appeared, a fragmented vision, as if the vamp had been peering through a foggy window. Czerno was already there and with him, a secret weapon, one that made the vamp believe they'd win before he'd been shot down. The vamp before her went down before she saw the outcome of the meeting between Damian and Czerno in the safe house, but she saw what the vamp expected to happen. Damian was meant to be kidnapped, not killed.

Dustin wrenched her to her feet.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Dusty," Jule cautioned, placing a hand on his shoulder. Dustin released her, glowering. There was only one thing that could make such a cold man so upset. Jule leveled a glare on her.

"Traci?" Rainy's voice was surprised and furious.

"You have thirty seconds, sweetheart," Jule said with a calmness that chilled her to the bone. "Or I'll give you to Dusty."

She didn't want to know what happened after that. She'd seen the dark side of Dusty in his home videos in the library before she told Damian about Claire.

"Damian was ambushed. Czerno knew he was coming here and had a small army of vamps. He had a secret weapon, but I don't know what it was," she said quickly.

"Where'd they take him?"

"He doesn't know."

Jule freed a gun from the small of his back and pointed it at the vamp beside her. She turned her head away, jumping as the shot rang out. Jule met her gaze calmly, and she resisted the urge to run. She didn't like the reminders that the men around her were capable of such violence.

"I'll deal with you later," he promised.

Ving pulled up and barely made it out of the car before Rainy grabbed him and slammed him over the hood.

"Dusty, calm them down," Jule ordered.

"Got it," Dustin said, trotting towards the men.

"Fan out and find out if any others are alive!" Jule shouted to the men. "You don't leave my sight, Oracle."

She acquiesced, afraid to disagree.

"I got one!" a shout rang out.

"I shouldn't have to tell you to tell me everything," Jule said, blocking her path with his arm. "There are two people on *my* list. No one else in this fucked-up universe matters."

She looked up, hearing the unspoken threat.

"I love him, Jule," she said, admitting the words for the first time.

He dropped his arm, and she picked her way through the bodies, covering her mouth to keep from vomiting. Lon knelt by a vamp whose chest still moved. She leaned down, bracing herself as she rested a trembling hand on his forehead.

For Damian.

"He's one of the last to arrive," she said and closed her eyes. "He came from an underground facility on the other side of Tucson."

"Where?" Dustin demanded.

"He's not exactly providing an address."

"Rainy!" Lon shouted and waved the brooding Guardian over. Still fuming, Rainy joined them.

"What landmarks did he pass?" Jule prodded. "Street names, anything."

The vamp's memories were fading fast and growing blurry. Sofia sifted through them.

"The mall. He passed it on his way out of town. Abandoned gas station, new housing development in the foothills. Dirt road, reservation perimeter on the left ..." she murmured.

"Do you recognize it?" Jule turned.

"I do," Rainy confirmed. "Keep going."

The memories stopped. Sofia withdrew, staring at the dead body in front of her.

"I take it he's dead," Dustin said. "Rainy, get your men. Call in those from the neighboring sectors. We'll need to hit fast then evac."

"You did good, sweetheart," Jule said. He lifted her to her feet. Her stomach growled. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Friday," she said, not waiting to think of what would happen to her if Damian disappeared too long.

"Dusty, we're going to have another problem soon," Jule said for Dustin's ears only.

"I'll be okay," she said. "I've gone two days without serious consequence."

Dustin looked at her, then at Jule. They exchanged one of their silent communications.

"Fuck," Jule said quietly, realization crossing his features. "Sofia, you said Czerno drained your blood?"

She nodded.

"We should've seen this coming," he said, running his fingers through his hair. His gaze went to Dustin. "You think ..."

"Yes," Dustin said.

"What?" she asked. "What happened?"

"You remember what I told you about Oracles offering a weak chink in a commander's armor?" Jule asked. "What I didn't say was how you can be used against him. When you're blood bound, you can't kill your master, and your master can't kill you. Czerno has your blood. Chances are he used your blood to incapacitate Damian."

She paled.

"There's no other way. D couldn't be overpowered unless his powers were crippled," Dustin said. "We gotta think this one through, Jule. We'll have one chance to rip his hideout open and..."

Sofia watched them walk away, alone and cold. If Damian died, it was because of her. She started toward the road, away from the field of death. Her phone rang. The number wasn't familiar, but she answered.

"Hello, love," Czerno greeted her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"If you're as smart as I suspect, you've probably used your gift to figure out where I am," he said.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Have you told your friends?"

"No," she lied.

"Good. I've got a deal for you. It's simple, really. Even if I kill Damian, I'll have to deal with all his people. However, if I have you, I'll beat them at every turn. If you come to me right now, I'll let him go."

"Swear on your soul?" she asked. Her heart beat so hard, she could barely make out his response.

"Love, I don't have a soul. By the time Dusty figures out what to do, Damian will be dead. In fact, if you refuse me now, I'll kill him before I hang up the phone."

She closed her eyes, shaking.

"If you agree, I'll free him when you show up at my doorstep."

"Yes," she said. "I'd give you anything for him."

"You have an hour."

He hung up, and she stared at the cell then looked to her car. The door was open as she left it, the keys in the steering column. Jule and Dustin reached the building, and she looked at them.

Czerno would never let her go. If she went to him now, she'd spend eternity with him, a slave to the Black God himself. The truth settled into the pit of her stomach, along with the realization that she meant what she'd said-- she would do whatever it took to free the man she loved.

Dustin met her gaze, and he froze.

"Sofia, no!"

She bolted to her car, far enough ahead of any of the men that they couldn't stop her. She flung herself in, slammed the door, and locked them. Peeling out, she floored it and tore down the road. The dead vamp's memories were fresh in her mind, and she sought the sights he'd passed.

Her phone rang, and she snatched it.

"Sofia, turn around. Now," the calm male's voice ordered.

"No, Jule. He'll kill him if I don't go."

"He'll kill him if you do."

Her tears rose, blurring her vision. She struggled for control, focusing on the road.

"Sofia," he said more gently. "Please."

"Stop," she begged. "It's my fault he was caught. I can fix it. I can fix it!"

"You can't fix a war that's been on for hundreds of thousands of years."

"I have to, Jule. I'm sorry. The world needs him," she said. She hung up the phone, gripped the steering wheel hard and drove.

She followed the vamp's fleeting directions. The staging area was where the vamp remembered it being, tucked at the base of a mountain in a draw. Sofia swallowed hard at the sight of so many vamps milling around. She drove up to the elevator entrance on the side of the draw. One vamp in particular seemed to be awaiting her and strode to the car when she rolled to a stop.

He waved her to exit, and she did so, her hands shaking as she opened the door. The other vamps didn't so much as acknowledge her as she stepped from the car. Her greeter motioned her to follow, and she obeyed, her mind on Damian and nothing else. He led her into a small, grey elevator that plunged quickly to the depths beneath the mountain.

The underground world was well built and bright with whitewashed walls lining corridors wide enough for two people to walk side by side. Her apprehension grew as the vamp led her down a maze of hallways through scores of other vamps and past multiple doorways. He reached a set of double doors. He opened one, and she entered. The study beyond was a replica of the one in Virginia, down to the Gothic hood on the fireplace.

Damian was nowhere to be seen. Czerno rose from a desk as she entered. The large man in black with lopsided shoulders and an executioner's hood pressed himself into a corner. The man with verdant eyes stood beside him, watching her. The Black God approached her, and she stepped back.

"I did what you asked. You said you'd free him," she said.

At Czerno's chilled smile, she knew he had no intention of freeing either of them. Panic swelled within her.

"Welcome home, love," he said.

She whirled, but the vamp that had led her into the underground lair blocked the doorway. She sucked in a breath, struggling to calm herself.

"Czerno, free him! You have me!"

"I'd rather kill two birds with one stone," he said. "Two, take her."

"No!" she breathed. "Please no! I'll do whatever you want! Please, just let him go."

"We'll talk later, love," Czerno assured her. "You'll have all the time in the world to beg me, on your knees and on your back."

His gaze swept over her in cold admiration as he spoke. The executioner from the corner emerged from the shadows and took her arms.

"Let him go! Please!" she shouted as he pulled her from the room.

Hysteria gripped her, and she fought him until he slung her over his shoulder. Tears blinded her.

"*Damian!*"

Sofia. His voice was weak, as if he were far away. She strained against the man again.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she sobbed.

The man in the executioner uniform dumped her onto a familiar surgical table in a room that stank of blood.

She screamed and launched off of it. He slammed the door closed, subduing her hysterical strikes with unexpected gentleness until she lay strapped to the cold table, weeping. When spent, she lay still, willing sleep or death to take her. Neither did. She closed her eyes to the ceiling. Eventually, she ran out of tears and lay spent on the table, mind on Damian.

Her stomach growled again. She'd starve in a day.

The shadow named Two emerged from the corner. She'd forgotten his presence, but he peeled off one glove to display a scarred forearm and hand. As she watched, he took a knife and sliced his wrist. She twisted her head away as he dripped the blood over her lips. He snatched her head with his other hand, then held her nose closed as she clamped her mouth shut. When she gasped for air, his blood trickled into her mouth. She started to spit it out but stopped.

She knew this man.

Though his blood didn't ensnare her as Damian's did, it tasted *familiar*. She drank, and he lowered his wrist to her lips. His memories flashed as they made contact. He knew nothing beyond the past twenty-four hours. His first memory was of waking up then of everything he'd done for the day.

He moved away when she ceased drinking, back to the corner. She twisted to stare at him. He was Damian's size, though by his lopsided shoulders and scars, he'd survived some sort of serious injury. He was lean and wiry compared to Damian's bulky build.

"Who are you?" she demanded, sensing she was missing something important.

He didn't answer, settling in his corner.

She lay still, the man in the corner so silent she had to look several times to make sure he was still there. Renewed by the blood, more sobs wracked her body as she thought of Damian and how badly she'd destroyed any plan Dustin or Jule could make.

"Damian," she whispered. "Forgive me. I should've let you make love to me."

Panic and tears soon drained her of energy, and she stared listlessly at the bloodied ceiling until the man in the corner stirred. The door behind her opened, and Czerno stepped in, trailed by the older, silent gentleman with bright green eyes.

"Still alive," Czerno observed, walking around her. "Two, let her walk around for an hour every twelve. I don't want her muscles turning to jelly."

Czerno trailed a finger down the side of her face, his chilling smile and the onslaught of visions making her gasp. She glared at him, hate in her gaze. She would *never* give this man the visions he wanted!

"I'm blood bound." She forced the words out. "If you kill Damian, I'll die."

"I've got something almost as good as him," Czerno said, motioning to the man in the corner. "According to my source of information, a blood relative can sustain an Oracle marooned without her master. We're going to test this. Either you'll die or you won't."

"I'll never help you!"

"I have eternity to break you, Sofia. I'm in no rush, though I do have a plan to motivate you. It involves removing your body parts, one at a time. Or maybe peeling your skin off? Maybe fucking you 'til you scream will soften you up a bit. We'll see what works, won't we?" He lowered his head to her ear. "I have options. You don't. Trust me. Everyone breaks."

Terror washed over her at his calm, controlled words. She'd seen what he was capable of in his visions. The best she could hope for was eternity on this table, alone, knowing what she'd done to humanity's defender. She started to cry again.

Czerno circled her again and ran his hands down her body, stepping away in approval. He left with a satisfied chuckle, trailed by the man with green eyes. The sound of the door closing sounded like the sealing of her fate.

"Forgive me, Damian," she whispered again.

Two freed her a few hours later and let her walk around the room. He stood in front of the door, unmoving as she explored her surroundings. The room was empty aside from the table. There was one vent in the ceiling, not large enough for her hand let alone her body. Despair washed over her, but she forced herself to concentrate.

Damian wasn't dead. She felt it. If she could only reach him ...

She faced Two, the only thing between her and escape. He was a puzzle, a man with no memory beyond waking up in the morning. The rest was blocked, as if a dam was placed there. She paced and stared at him.

... a blood relative can sustain an Oracle.

She'd heard no such thing, but then again, she didn't know anything about Oracles aside from what little she'd gleaned from books and testing herself. His theory was so far correct. Her stomach was content, and she hadn't thrown up. She approached Two hesitantly. He didn't move as she stopped in front of him. She took his hand. He obliged and removed his glove, rolling his sleeve to his elbow and withdrawing a knife. Though she wasn't hungry, she drank, exploring the black curtain shielding his memories as she did.

He pushed his sleeve up farther, revealing the bottom of a thick bicep with a partially visible tattoo. She slid her hand up his arm and nudged the sleeve. The image on his bicep was the same she wore around her neck.

Images flooded her mind, Damian's, Claire's, Isac's. She saw Damian watch the new king get his tattoo as a rite of passage, saw it again as Claire made love to the man meant to be her husband, saw it in Isac's vision as he hacked the tattooed man apart. The man hiding in the corner of her mind, he whose death plagued Damian for thousands of years.

Darian.

She staggered back, the visions cementing in her mind, overwhelming her. She tripped, and her head snapped back. Two caught her before she hit the ground. His stunted memories collided with the others running through her mind. His honey-colored eyes were visible in the harsh lighting of the room.

“Darian!”

His pupils dilated. He placed her on the table and retreated, shaking his head and swiping at the air around him, as if plagued by bees.

“Darian,” she repeated.

Kiri, answered the tortured voice of the man in her head.

Seizing control of himself, Two stepped forward and pushed her back, binding her to the table again. Her hope soared, and she watched him return to his corner.

“Your name is Darian. Your brother is Damian. You were born two years apart. You were supposed to marry Claire ...” She went on, closing her eyes as she repeated everything from the memories of others.

He didn’t move, didn’t respond. She spoke until she was hoarse. Her hope flagged, and she cried, then started again. She spoke until she drifted into an uncomfortable doze only to awake when he released her. Cramped, she stretched before approaching him again. She pulled the necklace from her neck.

“Look,” she said and touched his bicep.

Mechanically, he rolled his sleeve and pricked his wrist. The curtain blocking him from his memories was less defined, like ice beginning to thaw.

“This is who you are,” she said, holding up the symbol. “Your name is Darian. Your brother is ...”

She started over, talking until he bound her to the table once more. But he showed no sign of life as he took up his position in his corner, and desperation crept through her. She cried and kept talking, her sentences punctuated by sobs. At last, she stopped speaking and lay, exhausted. If there was a way to make him see what was in her head ... to *make* him remember ... she focused on Damian’s memories, the ones before the dark age, when he and his brother were happy.

“Hungry,” she whispered.

Two obeyed and moved forward, slicing his wrist for her again. As she drank, she replayed Damian’s memories over and over.

Damian needs you.

“*Kiri.*” His hoarse voice threw her off guard.

“Think, Darian, think,” she said. “Do you remember your brother Damian?”

An image flashed, that of Damian chained to a wall. Tears formed in her eyes.

“Yes,” she choked out. “Damian. Your brother.”

“Don’t cry, *kiri.*” He was struggling. She replayed the home videos, closing her eyes and focusing. If he were like his brother, he would hear her thoughts.

Two returned to his corner. She kept the movies playing, focusing on nothing other than the brothers’ time together. She drifted into a doze.

“Damian,” Two said, waking her.

“He needs you,” she whispered. “He’s in trouble.”

“Damian in trouble,” he repeated.

“Yes, Darian.”

“Don’t cry, *kiri.*” He fell into silence again for several hours. When he freed her again, she approached him and touched his hood.

“Remove it, Darian.”

He didn’t respond. She touched his arm, replaying the videos. After a brief mental tug-o-war, he pulled off the hood with one hand. His face was as deeply scarred as his hands. His hair was brown rather than white-blond, his beautiful eyes deep set and large. She took his face in her hands the way she had Damian the night he wanted to destroy the world and forced him to meet her gaze. His honey gaze was still.

“Damian needs you,” she whispered. “He’s in danger. I love him, Darian. Please help us.”

“Damian.”

She rose to her tiptoes and kissed him, her own memories of Damian forefront in her mind. She replayed their first kiss, his ring, the way his men spoke of him. She showed him Czerno - his master - and the darkness in Czerno's mind. She dropped to her feet and moved away.

"*Kiri.*" His eyes were closed as he said the word.

"Your name is Darian. Your brother is Damian." She touched her hands to his cheeks again. Emotions rippled across his face. "Please, Darian, please. You can do this."

His eyes opened, and he met her gaze. For the first time, she sensed he was aware of her and his surroundings. His golden eyes swirled.

"Remember," she said, holding up the necklace.

"Two!" Czerno pounded on the door. She waited. The life died from Two's eyes, and he replaced his hood.

"No. No, no, no!" she shouted, pounding on his chest. Sobbing, she dropped to her knees. Two stepped aside. Czerno entered.

"Congrats. You've survived two days. Looks like I was right," he said, satisfied. "Two, put her on the table. Kill Damian and come back when you're done."

Sofia tried to push him away as he lifted her onto the table. There was a tug at her neck, and she touched it, surprised to find the necklace gone. Two left, the necklace dangling in his hand. She sensed his deep confusion. He took the symbol with him for a reason, even if he didn't fully understand what. Her sudden flicker of hope died when Czerno spoke again.

"As soon as he's done, we'll start working on you," the Black God promised. "Start thinking of which way you want me to fuck you first." He closed the door behind him with a cold laugh, not bothering to bind her.

She curled on her side and wept.

I love you, Damian. Please forgive me!

* * *

Two had never heard *kiri* cry so hard. Her heart was breaking. He walked through the halls quickly, the emerging thoughts in his head baffling him. He couldn't remember what the master had ordered him away to do. Something about Damian, the man who made *kiri* cry. All he could see in his head was *kiri* sobbing and the dreams she'd made him remember. They weren't good dreams, and the ones she showed him weren't the only ones in his head. Every step he took brought more memories of people and places he felt to his core he knew – but couldn't recognize.

"Don't cry, *kiri*," he said in a ragged voice and gripped his head.

He didn't know what to do. His master was hurting her. Why didn't she go back to his head, where she was safe? Why did she come to see him? He took care of her and fed her and let her walk around. Every time he freed her, he hoped she would return to his head. But she didn't.

Damian. Darian.

The images she'd put his head made him stagger and fall against the rough wall. The chain around his hand bit into his finger, and he looked at it. It was *kiri's*. He rolled up his sleeve, staring in wonder at the tattoo on his bicep. He didn't remember how he got it, and he doubted it'd been there before *kiri* put it there hours before.

Damian needs you. Please help him, Darian. He was Darian, eldest son of the White God.

The dreams bombarded him faster now. He looked around him and at the necklace in his hand. He was going to Damian. If he freed Damian, *kiri* would go back to his head, where his master couldn't hurt her.

Two went to Damian's cell and opened the door. Damian was still and silent, but he wasn't dead. No, the master had been waiting to kill him, had been feeding Damian the same juice Two stopped drinking. Damian was chained to the wall so he could be force fed what looked like fruit punch. Two had helped force feed him, before he knew *kiri* loved him. Damian was the strongest man Two had ever met.

As Two gazed at Damian, another flash of images driving him to his knees. His gaze fell to the silvery ring the man before him wore. Two pulled up his sleeve. Damian had a symbol like his on his ring. He lifted the chain, *kiri's* chain, and looked at the identical marks, struck by the idea that he somehow belonged to the same world they did.

Two released Damian from the bonds and lifted him over his shoulders. He made his way through the crowded halls, grunting under the weight of the man. He followed a familiar path through a narrowing hall and looked at his palm for the three codes written in green ink there. Three doorways, three codes. The walk was familiar, though he didn't recall ever taking it before.

He took Damian outside to the rock where he and *kiri* had watched the stars once long ago and set him down. He gripped his head, which pulsed at the flood of images and *kiri's* own sobs.

"Don't cry, *kiri*," Two said.

He knelt over Damian and pulled the ring from his finger. He placed the necklace in Damian's hand and closed it gently.

"From *kiri*," he told the unconscious man. "She loves you, and she's sorry."

He turned and made his way through the doors he suddenly remembered traversing many times the past few days. And now that he'd done what she asked and saved Damian, he would return to *kiri* to convince her to return to his head, before his master killed her.

Two's chest clenched at the thought, and he was afraid. He didn't want *kiri* to die. She was *his*. She was all he had. As he stumbled through the halls, he heard the alarms blare.

He had to hurry.

* * *

Alarms sounded a few moments before the doors exploded off their hinges.

"*What did you do?*" Czerno roared in an inhuman voice.

Sofia darted off the table, staring at him as he entered, trailed by Two and the man with green eyes. The man with green eyes leaned over to Two, whispering to him. Two bowed his head, and the green-eyed man was gone in a sparkle of light.

"How did you free him? How did you alert them?" Czerno demanded, snatching her arm so hard she cried out.

"I've been right here!" she said, shoving at him and his black memories.

His backhand sent her world reeling. Fire lit up half her face, and she tasted blood in her mouth. She landed hard. He kicked her in the stomach, and she gasped. Czerno snatched her arm, his other hand raised for another blow.

"Master, they've penetrated the perimeter!" a voice shouted from down the hallway. The Black God looked from her towards the direction of the voice. He pushed her down and stepped over her, striding quickly to the door.

"Two, bring her," the infuriated Black God ordered. Two obeyed, lifting her off the floor and carrying her. She gazed up at him as he followed Czerno, looking again for some sign of life in his still gold eyes.

"Darian," she whispered. "Please, Darian, come back to me."

He didn't even look at her, and her hope plummeted again. They stopped in a small command center, where one wall displayed monitors.

"Now!" Czerno barked.

Jule's face materialized on the screen. Czerno snatched Sofia and dragged her close, the visions making her stagger.

"Where's Damian?" Jule demanded.

"Get your men out of here!" Czerno ordered. "Quickly, before I kill her!"

Fire tore through her, and she cried out. It increased, the sensation of frying from the inside out.

"Stop," Jule ordered. "Dusty, order a withdrawal."

The fire burned hot enough to devour Czerno's dark memories.

I'll protect you, kiri. The voice in her head came from Two. Czerno released her, and she fell, her body seizing in agony.

"Czerno! We're pulling out!"

"Cut it!" Czerno snarled. He kicked her as he passed. Jule's face disappeared from the screen, and the pain eased. Unable to move, she panted, body convulsing with aftershocks from the attack.

"They don't have him! He's here, somewhere! Find him!" Czerno ordered.

His vamps scampered out of the command center to obey. He stalked to her again and dragged her up. The man with the green eyes was suddenly behind him, watching *her*.

"I don't give a damn if he escapes. I have you," he growled. "Two, take this bitch to the helopad. We're evacuating." He hit her one more time, and she careened against Two, caught between consciousness and darkness. Two lifted her and carried her into a hallway teeming with vamps.

Damian was free! The thought pierced her thoughts, and she sagged against Two, not caring if she survived or not. Two took her down a quieter hall and set her down. She doubled over, pain from Czerno's attacks crippling her.

Two knelt over her. He held Damian's ring in front of her face and then tucked it into her jeans. He cocked his head to the side, as if listening to someone.

"Yes, master," he said to no one she saw.

She closed her eyes, in too much pain to concentrate. He touched her, and familiar warmth flashed through her, easing the pain. Two pulled her to her feet. Sofia stared up at him, not daring to hope he'd help her. He stalked down the hall. She watched him, tempted to run away, before realizing the amount of activity in the halls behind her guaranteed her capture.

She jogged after him with great effort as he strode through the maze. He emerged into a busier hall and waited for her, taking her arm and leading her through the vamps. They passed through the activity unscathed before he started down another hall. The alarms faded, and the halls grew cruder, unfinished. Sofia followed him as the halls angled up and narrowed until Two had to walk through them sideways. He reached a door finally and typed in the access code. It opened. They passed through two more doors before exiting into a cold desert night on the side of a mountain, overlooking the activity at the elevator's entrance.

Sofia almost cried in relief. Two continued walking, finding a narrow path in the dark and starting down it. She followed, shivering. The path wound its way downward, dumping them into a draw far enough away to be safe. Two walked on once he reached the desert, and she trotted after him, looking back at the floodlit entrance to the elevator. Gunshots streaked around the entrance. A massive explosion went off, shaking the ground beneath them.

She stopped and stared, throat tightening.

"Damian," she whispered.

Two took her arm, driving her onward. When assured she'd follow, he released her and marched on into the desert, away from the mountain. A sense of familiarity hit her as they neared a clump of rocks. She'd seen it in Pierre's future. The images she'd seen the night of the Quarterly replayed in her mind.

Pierre unloading his shotgun on the man in executioner's garb from Czerno's. It was dark, cold, and the shots hit the man with lopsided shoulders, dropping him dead to the ground. An explosion blazed in the distance. A woman was screaming, another man shouting.

The Guardians were here, ready to take the shot that would kill Darian. Urgency jarred her out of the memory, and she launched forward.

"Pierre, no!" she shouted, running past Two.

He snatched her as she passed, but not before she heard a shot and felt fire burn through her. She was driven back against Two, who caught her. Warm blood splattered her neck and face. She cried out in pain.

"Let her go!" She recognized Pierre's voice.

Two lowered her, pulling up his sleeves to fight.

"No!" She barked and snatched his shirt.

"Fuck, Pierre!" Dustin snarled. "Sofia? You okay?"

"I'm ... okay," she said, suddenly dizzy. "Dustin, don't shoot him, please! *Please!*"

A dark shape moved from the rocks while three more fanned out from the sides. Two strained against her grip and tensed. Sofia held onto him as if his life depended on it and shook her head to clear the dizziness.

"Darian, lower your head," she ordered. The man beside her hesitated and then obeyed. She yanked his hood off.

"Dusty, Jule's got him!" Rainy shouted triumphantly. "I'm calling the choppers."

"Fast," Dustin ordered. "The vamps are heading this way."

She twisted her head to see the jumbled outlines of the small army of vamps running toward them from the direction of the burning mountain. A flashlight blinded her. She held up her hand.

"*Mon dieu!*" Pierre said then cursed in French.

"Holy shit," Dustin breathed as the flashlight rose to Darian's face. "Holster 'em! *Now!*"

He moved forward, stopping to stare at Darian.

Pierre dropped beside her, muttering. Sofia sagged, exhausted. Before she started to drift into an in-between place, she saw Darian stand and look around, awake for the first time in thousands of years.

Dustin's face was a mottled mess of emotions. Darian eyed him warily, not recognizing him, before he knelt beside her again. Heat scorched through her and she gasped, fully awake once again.

"You can see the stars, *kiri*," he said in his monotonous, mechanical voice.

"I know, Darian. You did good," she managed.

"Rainy, where's my chopper?" Dustin shouted, drawing his weapon again.

"Looks like we should start running, *non?*" Pierre asked.

Sofia pushed Darian's hands away. Though she was fatigued, her wounds were healed. Pierre hauled her up.

"Pierre, carry her. We'll run," Dustin said.

I'll protect you, kiri, Darian said into her mind. Before Pierre could comply with Dustin's order, Darian shoved him aside and swept her off her feet.

They ran to the next nearest group of rocks, where a handful of four-by-fours waited. Darian placed her behind Dustin and climbed behind Rainy. Sofia wrapped her arms around Dustin and squeezed her eyes closed as the engine roared to life. Sand flew as they soared and leapt through the desert. The distant beat of a helicopter's wings drew closer as they raced away from the mountains. A chopper landed ahead of them on a wide, flat mesa.

Dustin braked hard and swung his leg over the handlebars.

"Sofi, go! Rainy, Lon, with me!"

Sofia shielded her eyes against the wind and sand. She hopped off the four by four, reached out to Darian and grabbed his hand, pulling him with her. His world was one of confusion, his memories overwhelming as the dam that had been in place for thousands of years crumbled. Darian held his head, and she wrapped her arms around him, wishing she could protect him from the dark memories breaking free.

I'm scared, kiri.

"Hold on, Darian," she whispered, tears blurring her vision. "I'm here."

He showed her a picture of where he'd taken Damian.

"Thank you, Darian!" she cried.

I'm scared, kiri, he said again into her head.

She felt his fear and squeezed her eyes closed, the man in her arms colliding with the man hiding in the corner of her mind. They became one, and this time, when she reached out to him,

he took her hand. She sobbed, absorbing the black visions spilling through his mind. Thousands of years of Czerno's depravity threatened to consume him. She was his only relief, and the visions threatened to consume *her*.

Peace, Oracle.

She didn't recognize the voice in her mind and felt the presence of someone-- or something-- beside her. A hand swept the dark memories from her mind, and she sagged against Darian, feeling the same sense of peace overtake his mind.

"Master, I did as you said," Darian said in a choked voice. "I saved *kiri*."

Good boy. Be at peace tonight, both of you. The being left, but the peace remained. Darian began to cry, and she held him tighter.

The chopper landed. Pierre hopped out and helped her and then Darian. They were at another discreet location, this one nestled between the peaks of two mountains. She darted off the landing pad with him, and the chopper went up again. The men on the small base drew their weapons at the sight of Darian. She took his arm, terrified they'd shoot the lost soul. Pierre led them to the empty, well-lit helicopter hangar, where several men crowded around a still body on the hangar floor. Her heart flipped when she saw him, and she sprinted forward.

"Damian!"

He was unconscious and pale. She dropped to his side and fluttered kisses across his face.

"Jule, what's wrong with him?" she asked, twisting.

"Poison," Darian croaked.

Jule's arm shot out to block the interloper's progress toward them. His mouth dropped open, and disbelief crossed his features. She hopped to her feet and shoved Jule's arm away, pulling Darian to the ground beside her.

"Darian, what is it?" she demanded. "Please tell me!"

He held his head and leaned into her, struggling. She took his face in her hands again, forcing his attention on her.

"Please, Darian!"

"Claire's ... blood," he said at last.

"Claire ... was meant to be his Oracle," Jule said hoarsely. He knelt beside them, staring at the horribly scarred man. "It's *your* blood, Sofia."

Horror descended upon her as she realized the depth of Claire's betrayal. Darian crouched beside his brother, studying him while emotions flew across his features. He placed his hands on Damian's face. Damian's body bucked. Darian moved away. Damian rolled onto his side and puked blood into the sand.

Sofia touched him, heart rejoicing. Dazed, Damian sat up.

"*Kiri* is safe," Darian said in a monotone voice.

Damian's head whipped around. The two brothers stared at each other, and she choked back a sob, joy and horror flying through her.

"Everyone out." Damian's voice was soft, but his command made everyone in the hangar jump. Jule pulled her to her feet and half-carried her out. He gripped her arms and turned her to face him. His gaze was unusually intense as he struggled to control his emotions. Jule embraced her, hugging her hard. She clung to him, overwhelmed.

"Here I thought I'd lost two people I cared about only to recover three," he said, hoarse. "If you weren't D's, I'd kiss you."

"Jule! We need to go!" Pierre's voice urged.

"All hell is about to start raining down," Jule said, pulling away from her. "Go with Pierre. Rainy wants to chew your ass out for dragging Traci into this, and then I'll chew your ass out for being so fucking stupid."

He wiped the tears from her face and kissed her forehead.

"Go," he said, pushing her toward her awaiting bodyguard.

"Bring them both back to me, Jule," she whispered. He gave a brisk nod.

“Sofia!” a female voice cried. Sofia turned, surprised to Traci racing toward her from across the helipad. Traci flung her arms around her, her fear fresh on her face. Sofia hugged her back.

“Two women,” Pierre muttered.

“Pierre, get ‘em outta here,” Jule said with a toss of his head in their direction.

“Gladly. Come with me, ladies.” Pierre gripped each of their arms and led them toward two black Tahoes. Sofia twisted to see the helo-hangar one last time, not yet able to believe the night’s events.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Damian’s brother was somewhere inside the scarred shell of a man before him. He stared into Darian’s gold eyes, seeking some sign of the man he’d known. Darian struggled visibly, his gaze stormy and his frame shaking. Damian’s own head was fuzzy from the effects of the drink he’d been force fed. He had a throbbing headache, and his body didn’t respond the way it should.

“Do you know me, brother?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“Damian,” came the mechanical voice. “*Kiri* loves you.”

Damian couldn’t help his smile at the words. Darian knew him because of Sofia. He reached out to his brother, absorbing what memories were in his mind. Darian’s mind was like a disaster scene after a hurricane. The bits and pieces of who he was were there, disjointed and scattered. Two people were all he knew with certainty: Sofia and the Watcher with his forest green eyes. His brother wasn’t sure of anything or anyone else, even if he did match the faces in his thoughts with those around him.

“Be gentle. He’ll break if you push him,” the Watcher said.

Damian twisted, surprised to find his body stiff with the simple movement. He was too out of sorts to feel the Watcher’s arrival.

“Master,” Darian said, bowing his head.

The sight of someone once so powerful and proud in submission to *anyone* infuriated him. For the first time in his life, Damian was speechless when confronted with the horror before him.

“He’s been abused for thousands of years,” the Watcher said, pausing beside the still, scarred man and resting a hand on his head. “He’ll need your help.”

“Like I wouldn’t help him,” he snapped. He looked to his brother again, fury of the deepest kind running within him. He loved Darian, always would, but understanding what he’d been through for thousands of years made him wish his brother had died instead of being forced to bear such pain.

“I can only coach,” the Watcher reminded him. “Your Oracle and Darian had to do the real work. If she’d been any less of an Oracle than what she is ...” Darian would have spent the remainder of his life in the hell that’d claimed him. Damian’s throat tightened at the unspoken words.

“Claire did this to him.”

“Yes, she did,” the Watcher said. “After the attack, Czerno brought Darian back to life. He wasn’t part of the plan to kill him, but he found out from Claire when they met shortly before Darian’s death. He understood that the Black God can never truly kill the White God for fear of unleashing the Original Beings, who would crush him. He was there to save your brother when Isac finished and kept him under control using Claire’s blood. I think he’s since been sickened with evil and forgotten if you don’t exist, neither does he.”

“My own enemy saved him,” Damian said with a harsh laugh. “Our world is so fucked up.”

“Yes, *ikir*, it is,” the Watcher agreed.

The depth of Claire’s betrayal made him wish he could kill her again a thousand times over! He’d been too kind in his execution of the sick bitch!

“*Kiri*,” Darian said almost sadly and looked around as if lost.

Damian’s spinning emotions warmed at the idea that Sofia saved him. He didn’t want to think about the probability behind such a powerful Oracle appearing when she did. No, he wouldn’t look that gift horse in the mouth, not when the embodiment of her ability sat hunched before him.

“Will he ever be close to the man I knew?” Damian whispered the thought, unable to help the tears that rose with it.

“There is a legend among the humans of the phoenix, who rises from his own ashes,” the Watcher replied. “Your brother will never be what he was, but he will rise again as the Grey God.”

He looked to the Watcher, surprised. “Darian is the Grey God?”

“Yes, *ikir*. He will be forever stuck between the two worlds, the good and the evil, without entering either or leaving either behind. His will not be an easy role to fill.”

He reached out to his brother and touched his head to Darian’s forehead. Darian didn’t resist, and Damian delighted in the idea that the sound of him breathing meant his brother was truly alive.

“Watcher, I love him, and I can’t fathom his pain,” he said. “Will he be lost like this forever?”

“No. Even in human time, his suffering will be short but it will be very bad for him until it ends,” the Watcher replied.

“Sofia can help him.”

“There will be others who will help him, too. He will need them all, and he will need you if he is to take his place as the Grey God. One of your team captains will have friends as well.”

“Jule is as old as you,” Damian said. “Or older?”

“Close,” the Watcher admitted. “Jule is still not in favor among my kind. His penance is not yet served.”

“Good. Leave him here with me.”

“You’ll not face anyone willing to challenge you for him, *ikir*, I assure you, though there may be some left who *might* help him.” The amount of distaste in the Watcher’s voice amused him. Jule had never said what he’d done to piss someone off and get exiled to earth, but it must have been bad if the Watcher’s kind clipped his powers and sent him packing. “By your leave, *ikir*,” the Watcher said with a bow of his head.

Damian waved him away, his attention returning to Darian. He touched his brother’s face, his emotions soaring once again.

Darian was alive. Sofia was safe. In that moment, nothing else mattered to him. He released a deep breath and rose, aware the birth of a new god and discovery of a powerful Oracle indicated nothing but more trouble to come.

“Come, brother, let’s take you back to *kiri*,” he said.

Darian stood obediently, and Damian’s throat tightened again to know his brother was at his side.

* * *

Sofia watched the last of the blood swirl down the drain. She leaned her head against the shower wall, exhausted. Damian’s heavy ring hung off a chain around her neck, and she clenched it. The drive from the mountains to the safe house had seemed to take forever. She was alone with her thoughts the entire way despite the presence of Pierre and Traci.

“You okay?” Traci called, voice muffled by the bathroom door.

“Yeah.” Sofia turned off the shower and dried herself before opening the door between the small bathroom and the bedroom. Traci sat on an unmade bed belonging to one of the Tucson Sector members, and Sofia eyed her Guardian. “Pierre, can I get some privacy?”

“Nope,” he said from his position on a chair inside the door. “You’re both grounded.”

Traci handed her a small pile of her clothing. Doubtful the model's clothes would fit, Sofia moved deeper into the bathroom to dress in jeans too long for her petite frame and a t-shirt too snug to be comfortable.

"When will you know if the house is safe?" she called.

"Soon," was his vague response. "They have to finish their clean-up."

"Did they find Czerno?"

"They won't. He goes poof and returns to one of his other bases, leaving everyone else to fry."

Sofia shivered, unable to help the trickle of fear and pure hatred for the sick creature who tortured Darian.

"Did you really shoot her?" Traci asked.

"Not on purpose," Pierre grated.

"That's kind of an extreme form of revenge for asking you about croissants."

Pierre mumbled a few curses. Sofia wiped the fog away from the mirror. Her bruises were gone, and her two-toned eyes were calmer than they'd been. She hadn't felt like she belonged in this world until she'd seen what good she could do. The death visions, the distrust everyone on the planet had for a soul-reader, the inability to eat ... they were nothing compared to helping a man find his soul again. While she didn't yet understand the depths of her new world, she found peace in knowing this was indeed her world, too.

"Pierre, I want to go home!" she complained.

"Okay."

"Really?" She poked her head out of the bathroom. He lowered his phone.

"All clear. You are coming with us, mademoiselle," he said to Traci.

Traci sprang up and snatched her purse. Pierre grimaced and rose more slowly. Sofia slipped on oversized flip-flops Traci dug out of one of the closets. Pierre's phone dinged, and he opened it again.

"There are a few missions going on, but they said the house is clear," he said. "Linda is there. Looks like we'll have to evac and rebuild the Tucson Sector. Czerno knows where all our safe houses are."

Sofia only half-listened as she led them down the stairs, anxious to get back to Damian and the place that had become her home. Grande and Lon awaited them in the living room, and they rose as she approached. Two armored Tahoes sat out front with an additional two more well-armed Guardians. They all piled into the SUVs.

"If I weren't so scared, this would be neat," Traci whispered to her. "Armored cars, bodyguards ... like we're famous or something."

"It is kinda neat," Sofia agreed. "Until your bodyguard shoots you."

"If you keep mentioning it, it won't be an accident next time," Pierre retorted, shooting her a look in the rearview mirror. She smiled, and Traci covered her mouth to keep him from hearing her laugh.

"Pierre," Sofia said with a serious note. He glanced at her. "Thank you for taking care of me. You're a good man. I hope you stay my bodyguard."

"You're welcome." Though still arch, his tone had softened enough to show her he wasn't unaffected by her genuine words.

He drove them through back roads and alleys to ensure no one followed before taking the highway and exiting into a direction that appeared to be nothing but desert. The mansion was invisible until they crossed the boundary of Damian's magic, when it appeared out of nowhere: an expanse of green grass, trees, and the stone building in the middle of the desert. Pierre dropped them off in front, waiting until they stepped across the entrance before driving off. The compound hummed with activity, from the gardens that served as a helipad to the teeming barracks and Guardians pacing the halls. She was reminded of a scene from a movie, where an

army mobilized for war. They remained in the foyer, uneasy with the amount of activity and weapons, until approached.

"Linda's asleep already. Go on up and rest. We've got to start moving everything within twenty-four hours," Lon told them, slinging a machine gun over his shoulder.

"Traci," Rainy appeared from down another hallway, holding out his hand. She went to him, ducking out of the paths of a few Guardians.

In the midst of the activity in the mansion, Sofia saw Dustin. He settled one of his cool looks on her and tossed his head toward the stairs. He didn't look to be in a mood for questions, so she hurried past him to her room, Pierre trailing. She closed the door, surprised at how quiet her room was.

She was about to lie down when she sensed Damian walk by. Her heart soared, and she touched the ring at her neck. She hesitated, sensing he would be angrier with her than Jule or Dustin had been. Or both combined. Steeling herself, she passed Pierre at her door and knocked on Damian's door.

Not in the mood, Sofia.

She opened the door, heart pounding. He was framed against the balcony once again, and she leaned against the door before venturing forward. Despite the cool fear spiraling through her, she couldn't help but feel thrilled at the sight of him after she thought she'd lost him.

"If you ever, ever, do anything like that again ..." He didn't have to finish the threat. His tone was enough to tell her he'd show no mercy. He was too angry to face her, and she was glad of it. She hugged herself, wanting to throw her arms around him but knowing he was in as an approachable of a mood as Dustin.

"I brought this back," she said and pulled off the chain, placing the ring on the table nearest the door. "I wanted to apologize to you, Damian," she continued. "When I was in that room ..."

His grip on the railing tightened, and she stopped, afraid of pushing him through the brittle façade containing his emotions. After a thick moment of silence, she forced herself to continue.

"I swore to myself I'd do this," she said. "Damian, I love you. If you don't hate me for what I did, if you still ... want me ... I'm yours."

He said nothing, didn't move. A knock sounded at his door. She took the opportunity to escape, darting by Dustin to her room.

She'd said her piece. She didn't know if she'd hurt him enough to drive him away forever or if there was a sliver of him that still wanted her. Tortured by the thought she might have waited too long to realize what she had, she paced her room until too tired to stand.

* * *

Just when he'd thought Sofia couldn't surprise him more, she did. The insanity of what she did was beyond his comprehension. While he loved the *thought* of her commitment to him, her action made him want to explode. And then to waltz in and deliver such an important message at a time when he wanted nothing more than to remain infuriated with her for her actions ...

"Fucking women," he muttered.

"That fucking woman saved your brother's life," Dusty reminded him.

He hadn't yet reconciled how he felt about seeing his brother alive and in so much pain. He was more and more appalled by the memories afflicting his brother, what he'd gone through since his supposed death. Darian was showing more signs of life. He'd spent the morning vomiting blood and was able to remember Jule and Dusty by afternoon.

And *kiri*. He knew Sofia better than he knew Damian. Damian closed his eyes in pain, unable to shake his brother's black history.

"Though if I were you, I'd still be super pissed at her."

"I am," he assured him.

Dusty's gaze grew intent. "Damian, I'm sorry. We should have prevented her from leaving. I never thought she'd do something like that," he said quietly.

"I don't hold you responsible," Damian said with a smile. "If there's one thing I've learned about humans, it's that you can't control them."

"It *is* my responsibility. She's your mate and my sister. I swear it'll never happen again. The oath I took to you and Jule I now take to her." Dusty's conviction was on his face. Damian was touched.

"Thank you, Dusty," he replied in a hushed tone. "I doubt she'll appreciate it though. The first time she forgets your birthday, all hell will break loose."

Dusty shook his head.

"I am grateful to you, Dusty," Damian replied more seriously. "It's been a rough few days."

"How are you feeling?"

"Good. Easier for me than Darian to readjust."

"How is he?" Dusty asked.

"He's lost in his mind right now. He'll have to work through it."

"I don't suppose there are any shrinks among the Naturals."

"Don't think so. Sofia can work with him some. I don't know how she reached him inside that dark maze," Damian said with a shake of his head.

"Neither do I."

"What a sick bastard. If I could kill Czerno ..." Damian swore darkly. How sick was the man who kept his former enemy as a slave?

"Fuck, D, I'd take killing Claire over Czerno any day," Jule said, appearing near the door. "Czerno's job is to be a bad guy. Claire was the worst kind of traitor imaginable."

"Good point," Damian said. "I was able to take care of that issue, though. I can't touch Czerno."

"I love Sofia, but I hope you take a switch to her ass," Jule advised as he tossed himself into one of the chairs.

"I told him it was your fault," Dusty said.

"It was," Jule agreed. "And I'm deeply sorry for it, Damian. On what soul I have, I swear never to allow harm to come to *kiri*."

Damian chuckled. "It wasn't either of your faults. I think this was a small thing they call fate," he assured them. "And thank you both."

"We still good for tomorrow?" Jule asked, referencing their journey to Europe.

"Yep. Dusty and Darian will be babysitting my Oracle."

"I'll keep her in line," Dusty assured him.

"I'm too angry at her to pity her," Jule said. "You gonna try to rein in Pierre, too?"

"If only. The day *kiri* grows tired of him, he's going to my behavior modification training," Dusty assured him.

"Only if *kiri* agrees," Damian warned.

"Is this how you train 'em in the eastern hemisphere?" Dusty demanded, turning to Jule.

"Better a benevolent team player than a dictator," Jule retorted.

"Disciplinarian. I don't let them run amok and follow their *feelings*. I give them structure," Dusty corrected him.

"Like robots."

Their long-standing feud over leadership styles was interrupted as Darian appeared in the midst of them. Damian's throat tightened, and his eyes misted at the sight of his brother. Darian appeared confused as he took in Jule and Dusty, recognition blooming slowly. He turned to Damian, his scarred features the most beautiful sight Damian had ever seen.

"*Ikir*," he said, nodding his head in submission. "May I see *kiri*?"

"You don't need permission to do anything," Damian said gently, aware his brother was not yet himself. "Please don't call me *ikir*. I'm your brother, not your master. And yes, go see *kiri*. She'll be happy to see you."

"I will be happy to see her, *ikir*," Darian said. He adored Sofia, that much was obvious, even if he wasn't really sure where-- or who-- he was most of the time. Damian's feelings for her swelled even more.

"How are you, Darian?" Jule asked with a warm smile.

"I am well, *ikir*," came the mechanical reply. "Please excuse me, *ikir*." And he was gone. Damian's gaze lingered. Darian had a long way to go, but he was alive.

"Take care of both of them, Dusty," he murmured.

"I swear it," Dustin said.

"He's as strong as you, D. He'll pull through," Jule said. "And Dust-man won't let anything near them."

"Damn right I won't."

Damian smiled. He knew as much and was as grateful for the two men before him as he was at finding his brother again.

* * *

Visions of Czerno and home videos from Darian morphed into a grotesque nightmare that made her body shake, even as she tried to push the dream from her thoughts. Insomnia was a blessing from such darkness.

Come, Damian ordered.

She hesitated before pulling on her robe and obeying. The mansion was quiet again, the signs of activity from earlier gone. Pierre glanced up from the game he played on his iPhone as she passed him. He watched her until verifying where she went before returning to the game.

Damian's suite was lit only by a blazing fire in the hearth, and the scent of Jule's cigars hung in the air. She waited, gaze falling to Damian. He appeared calm and in control again, if not relaxed, with the only three men he'd ever trusted. Her heart almost burst at the sight of Darian in one of the seats. Though he was still unable to understand exactly what was going on, he'd improved dramatically even since she last saw him.

Damian waved her in without looking at her, his eyes reflecting the fire. He patted the seat beside him on the couch facing Dustin and Jule. She didn't hesitate to settle beside him, knees drawn to her chest, and leaned into his body, struck by the difference between the men before her: Dustin, the cold Greek prince, and the mysterious dark warmth of Jule. At once, the home videos and nightmares faded. She sighed in relief and rested her head on Damian's shoulder. He moved his arm to wrap around her and pulled her against him.

"You're not forgiven," he reminded her.

"Damn straight," Jule said, though there was warmth in his face. "If I had a woman who pulled the bullshit you did, you'd--"

"Be in deep shit, *kiri*," Darian finished for him.

Jule chuckled. Darian's disapproving gaze mirrored Damian's, and Sofia hid her face against Damian's chest as the three men facing her gave her similar looks.

"I'll never have a woman, if they're this much trouble," Dustin declared.

"Agreed. And if I do, she'll learn to call Damian, Dusty, or Darian before leaving the house," Jule chimed in. "Which is exactly what you will do, *kiri*."

Sofia couldn't help but say, "You'll both have women, and Dustin, when you're in trouble, she'll call *me*."

Jule and Dustin both looked to Damian.

"Not sure I like this Oracle shit," Dustin voiced for both of them.

"No way, *kiri*," Jule said firmly.

"If she didn't come after you when you needed her, why would you want her at all?" she challenged.

"Definitely steering clear of Americans," Dustin added.

“Because, *kiri*, you can’t do what these men can,” Jule scolded. “And D doesn’t have any other brothers for you to rescue. You know that’s the only reason you’re not locked in your room for the rest of your life.”

“No worries,” Damian said with an edge that made her still. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Glad I’m not you,” Dustin said, leveling a look at her.

She huddled closer to Damian, unwilling to look at his face. “What does *kiri* mean?” she asked.

“Beloved. It’s used for sisters, mothers, and mates in our world,” Jule answered. “By the way, you’re on my list. I hope I’m off yours.”

Her throat tightened, understanding the honor despite his nonchalant delivery. She nodded.

“What list?” Dustin asked.

“You’re not on hers,” Jule assured him. “I imagine only Pierre is on it now.”

She laughed.

“I sense a reassignment,” Dustin said, gaze going to the fire.

Her gaze fell to Darian. He was struggling. By the blank look in his unseeing eyes, he’d fallen into his thoughts again. She shifted away from Damian and touched Darian’s forehead, absorbing the horror of his memories. She drew a sharp breath but forced herself to stay, to take his pain.

“No, *kiri*, you’ve done enough,” Darian said, taking her hands. “I have much to atone for.” His heavy words broke her heart, but she respected his request and returned to Damian’s side. The horrors from his mind fell away as she curled against her mate again.

The men fell into silence, and she sensed the silent communications she couldn’t hear. Comfortable against Damian, she drifted into a restful doze until he shifted. She roused herself, surprised to see the other three had disappeared at some point. She sat up, forcing herself to meet his golden gaze. His face was unreadable, his gaze steady.

“Please don’t be angry,” she said, touching his face. He took her hand in his and leaned forward, allowing his forehead to rest against hers. She sighed, delighting in the tender moment.

“Are you going to run from me again?” he asked without moving.

“No, Damian. Never again. I promise,” she swore just as quietly.

“Good.” He stood and swept her into his arms. “I’ve got plans for you tonight,” he said, desire flaring on his face as he carried her into his bedroom. “And every night from here on out.”

Her heart sang as she realized she hadn’t lost him after all, her body echoing the desire on his face.

* * *

The next morning, the sight of snow falling outside her window drew her gaze as she packed for the evacuation. Damian replaced his necklace around her neck, a small comfort until his work in the European front was finished. She approached the window, amazed at the snow, until her gaze fell to a figure kneeling like a dark gargoyle in the middle of the white lawn. He’d been there long enough that the snow had covered his footprints.

Alarmed, she swung on her robe and snatched one of Damian’s trench coats. She flew down the stairs and through the teeming hallways. Pierre trotted after her into the cold morning. The air was cold, brisk, the snowflakes falling faster. Snow crunched under her feet and quickly soaked her flimsy slippers.

“Darian!” she exclaimed, dropping to her knees beside him. His eyes were closed, his body hunched and hands clenched together. He wore nothing more than a T-shirt and jeans. Snow covered his hair, and his skin was cold. “Darian!” She touched his face.

He opened his eyes and stared at her, a tortured look on his face.

“I remember them,” he said. “All of them.” His memories flashed, and she winced at the sight of the executions he’d committed for Czerno.

“That wasn’t you, Darian,” she whispered. “You had no control over yourself.”

"I'm weak."

"You're not. Damian was crippled by the same thing." She regretted alluding to it the moment the raw look of anguish crossed his face.

"Claire," he said hoarsely. He closed his eyes, his jaw clenched hard enough for the muscles to tick. Tears escaped one eye and trailed down his face. She felt her own tears spill over at the depth of his pain. His was not the kind of pain she could fix.

"You're safe, Darian," she said and draped the trench coat over his shoulders. She placed her hands on his face and pulled him closer, hugging him. "We won't let anything happen to you."

Dustin approached, his gaze as haunted as Darian's. He knelt, ruffling the snow from Darian's hair.

"It's okay, brother," he said quietly. "Let's get you inside." He helped Darian to his feet. "Sofi, get ready. We're evac-ing you and Darian next," he ordered. "Pierre, pack your things. You're going, too."

She didn't miss the look of relief that crossed Pierre's face and suspected he'd been threatened with a reassignment for shooting her. Obviously, Damian had reconsidered. She was happy for it. Pierre tossed her a familiar cell phone as they entered the mansion. An unread text message blinked on the screen.

4got 2 tell you. Luv u 2.

She grinned and typed a response. *Man up and tell me in person.*

Next time I see you, I'll do better-- I'll show you, he promised, his whisper sliding into her mind. A thrill went through her.

"I still hate that," she muttered.

In the words of an Oracle I once knew, get used to it.

"I love you, Damian. Come home soon."

I will, kiri, I will.

Truly thrilled about the start to her new life, she folded the phone and dropped it into her pocket. She followed Dustin and Darian down the hall.

Sofia. The new voice in her mind was the same as the voice she'd heard during the chopper ride with Darian. He was waiting for her. She pushed open the cracked door to the library. Inside was a man she recognized from Czerno's, the small man with dark green eyes and white hair. Her heart slowed, and she froze inside the doorway.

He gave a fatherly smile and approached her, holding his hand out, palm up. She hesitated, torn between screaming for Dustin and staying where she was. She touched her palm to his, driven back by the impact of images that rippled through her. The whole of Damian's history, his forefathers', all the way to the Beginning, when spirits milled without purpose before the Original Beings shaped the universe into something much greater.

She snapped her hand back and stared at him, overwhelmed. The man before her was from before time, before life, before *everything*. He clasped his hands behind his back. The memories rippled through her then coalesced, locking themselves away in the back of her mind.

"Watcher." Dustin's warning growl was cold. He took her arm, pulling her behind him. Her gaze was riveted to the man before her. His green gaze switched from her to Dustin, never blinking.

"I mean no harm, Guardian," the Watcher said.

"What are you?" she breathed, the images swimming through her thoughts.

"*Ikira*, I am a Watcher, one of those who guards the Guardians," he said with another of his warm smiles. "My job is to make sure the pendulum never swings too far into the court of the Black God."

"Bullshit," Dusty snapped. "You have no loyalties to either God."

"True, but it's always been in the Watchers' best interest to ensure humanity perpetuates. The Black God doesn't share our view."

“Master.” Darian’s voice was monotonous. “I obeyed you. *Kiri* is safe.”

She turned to see his gaze on the ground, his body braced as if for a blow. Heartbroken by his return to the slave he was, Sofia was stopped from comforting him by Dustin’s grip on her arm.

“I know, Darian,” the Watcher said. “You did well. If I may, *ikir*?”

He looked to Dustin. Dustin gave a tense nod and pushed her behind him, out of the Watcher’s path. He was coiled and ready to snap if the Watcher so much as looked at her too long. She wasn’t about to contradict the cold executioner when he was in this mood.

The Watcher approached Darian, who knelt in response to a silent command. The Watcher placed both hands on his head. Darian jerked.

“Tomorrow, when you awake, you will no longer be a slave. You will become the Grey God, who you were born to be,” the Watcher told him.

“I thought Watchers had a policy of non-interference,” Dustin said in a measured tone.

“We do, *ikir*, unless the balance is so disturbed that we must interfere.” His words sent a chill through Sofia. “You will see me again, *ikir*. “And you, *ikira*. You will remember the secrets I gave you one day, when you must use them.”

She didn’t like the ominous words and looked up at Dustin again, seeking to gauge just how serious the situation was. He was pale beneath the golden skin. She crept closer to him. If he was worried, she had a reason to be terrified.

“My dear Darian,” the Watcher said in a softer tone, “I cannot take the pain of the memories you will experience in the morning when you remember the whole of your existence. Do not be consumed by them. You have a great fate to fulfill in this life yet.”

“Yes, master,” was the monotonous response.

“Tell the White God I send him greetings,” the Watcher said and moved away from them. In a gentle flicker of light, he was gone. Sofia released the breath she was holding and moved in front of Dustin, gazing up at him. Her hands shook.

“Dustin?” she prompted when he remained staring at the place where the Watcher had been. He looked down at her. Sensing her fear, he touched her arm, the edge of tension dissipating. His look softened, and rare warmth crossed his features.

“There’s a lotta shit about our world you’ll figure out,” he promised her. “Watchers rarely cause us harm, but they rarely involve themselves in our business either.” His considering gaze returned to Darian. “Don’t worry, *kiri*. First things first. We need to evac now.”

She nodded, sensing there was much he wasn’t saying. He shepherded them to the library door, returning to his original purpose. She took Darian’s hand and led him down the hall like the lost child he was. She braced herself against the memories running through his head and the confusion as he tried to figure out where he was.

“You’re safe, *kiri*,” he said.

“So are you, Darian,” she replied.

As they strode into the gardens toward an awaiting helicopter, she couldn’t help but think she’d just stepped into something far greater than she could ever imagine.

The War of Gods series

Damian's Oracle, Book One (01/2011; revised 10/2011)

Damian's Assassin, Book II (02/2011; revised 11/2011)

Damian's Immortal, Book III (12/2011)

The Grey God (05/2011)

***Continue reading for an exclusive excerpt from
"Damian's Assassin," Book II in the War of Gods series.***

Damian's Assassin

Chapter One

Fifteen years ago

Bianca looked from her pale brother - lying too still on the hospital bed - to the smiling nurse. The room was dark except for the light above Jonny's bed and the red and green lights dotting the machines keeping him alive.

"Sweetie, you can lay down in the bed next to your daddy's," the nurse said.

Adults would argue with her if she told them she wasn't leaving Jonny's side until he was healed. They thought her too young to understand words like *coma* and *deteriorating*, and they accused her of lying when she said she could help him. The nurse handed her a thin blanket then pointed to the phone.

"Ok," she replied.

"Call me if you need anything, ok? All you have to do is pick up, and I'll answer."

"Thank you," she said.

Satisfied, the nurse swept up the linens she'd changed and left. Bianca waited until she heard the door click closed and looked across the small bay to where her daddy slept.

She'd been able to do *that*. Why couldn't she heal Jonny? She scooted forward, frustrated and tired, and touched her brother's arm. She felt death within him, as she had with her cat Snickers after a car ran him over. She'd saved Snickers. She'd kept the flowers around Jonny's bed as fresh as the day they arrived last week. She'd helped her father sleep.

She couldn't help Jonny.

Maybe daddy was right. Maybe she was too small. But she was nine, and Jonny was even smaller at four. He really wasn't too much bigger than a cat, not when compared to an adult.

She cried again, snuffling and wiping at her nose before she pushed herself off the chair. She tried another wilted flower, bringing it back to full bloom.

"Jonny ... " she whispered. "I'm so sorry, Jonny!"

It was her fault he was in the hospital. Her step-mother - Jonny's mother - had said as much. Bianca cringed as she had earlier that day when her mother and Jonny's mother screamed blame at each other until the nursing staff kicked them out of the room.

She didn't mean to hurt him. He was annoying, and she wanted him to leave her alone. All he ever wanted to do was play with his stupid baseball, and she'd taken it and thrown it into the forest. He went after it, and she played with her toys all day. He didn't come back, even when it got dark, and it was time for them to go inside.

"I can help him," a man said. No one had come in through the door she faced. She twisted in her chair to see a man near the dark windows whose eyes were the color of her bright purple Easter dress.

"Are you a doctor?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

"I can make it so he doesn't remember that you did this to him," the stranger said. "You understand that medical treatment isn't free?"

Her chin trembled as guilt flowed over her and she swallowed hard, nodding.

"It will cost you something."

She dug through the pockets in her jeans and pulled out the stash of one dollar bills she'd been given for trips to the candy machine down the hall. She counted them with shaking hands.

"I only have four dollars," she said with some dismay.

"I require more than that." His eyes seemed to swirl, around and around, changing from the color of her mother's tulips to a color almost as dark as the night. He wasn't like the other doctors. His voice wasn't kind. He had no emotions, like a man in a Halloween mask.

"I don't have anything else!"

The man with purple eyes knelt in front of her. His face didn't look rubbery like a Halloween mask, but he didn't look normal. The air around him was cold like it was around an air conditioning vent. She took a step back.

"You have to help him," she whispered. "Please!"

"I will help him, Bianca. If you make me a promise," he said. "You must keep this promise no matter what, or your brother will get sick and die. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"There is a man you will meet when you are older, a man who -"

"This is low, even for you," a second man's voice said.

She jumped at the new voice. The second man's hand clamped on the first man's shoulder. The eyes of the newcomer were the color of their Christmas tree. He had Papaw's face, with wrinkles around his eyes and a kind smile.

"By divine code, you can't interfere," the man with the purple eyes said in a tone that made her shrink away.

"By divine code, neither can *you*."

Purple-eyes rose. Green-eyes stepped between them, and Purple-eyes backed towards the window again.

"We're so much better than this, brother," Green-eyes said. "Children are off limits."

"For your kind, Watcher. There are no boundaries for us."

"Divine code disagrees with you and the rest of the Others."

Purple eyes looked at her, and she shrank behind Green-eyes.

"The Grey God will destroy us all, brother. You can stop this war here, now," Purple-eyes said with a look that made her snap her eyes closed.

"You're a fool led by a fool. Go, brother," Green-eyes said. She held her breath and waited, able to feel the tension between them even with her eyes closed until he spoke again. "He's gone, Bianca."

She opened one eye, then the other, confirming his words. She started crying again.

"Jonny's gonna die!"

"You can save him."

"I can't! I tried! I *can't*!"

"Listen, Bianca." He took her arms and sat her in a chair, handed her a fistful of tissues, and knelt. She blew her nose loudly and looked at him through blurry eyes. His small smile was kind, his bright eyes unblinking. "You have a very special gift. No one else has one like you."

"But I'm too little to save Jonny."

"Nonsense. You can save Jonny. You hear his body speak of the death in him?"

"It's awful," she whispered.

"If you listen really hard to what his body tells you, you can save him. No one wants to die, and his body will tell you what it needs from you. You need to rest tonight, sleep as much as you can. In the morning, you'll be able to heal him."

"But I've been trying for days!"

He touched her again, his hand cool but the electricity that shot through her warm.

"I've woken your gift completely," he said. "You must promise to keep it a secret and to make Jonny keep it a secret."

She blinked rapidly, startled by the sensations going through her.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"You must also never harm another. It is the way of ancient healers. Do you understand?" he asked.

"Ancient healers?"

"In time you'll learn more. Do you understand what I ask of you?"

"I don't know. I think so," she murmured.

"Can you promise to keep Jonny safe?"

"He's my brother," she said, sniffing again.

"Good. Go to sleep, Bianca. I'll watch over your brother tonight. In the morning, you'll save him."

For the first time, she noticed he wasn't wearing a doctor's white coat. "You're not a doctor, are you?" she ventured.

"No, but I'm a friend here to watch over you and Jonny."

Something about the man made her feel safe, and the warm electricity in her body made her sleepy. She kissed Jonny goodnight and crossed the bay to curl up with their father.

When she'd gone, the Watcher placed a hand on Jonny's forehead.

Come back, god-slayer. Your time is yet to come.

As strong as the girl was, she was too small to bring Jonny back from the place the Others sent him. The Watcher's hand fell away, and his gaze went to the dark side of the bay, where the little girl was already fast asleep.

A healer and a god-slayer born into the same family.

He smiled.

Chapter Two

Present Day
Miami, Florida

Bianca drew a heart around her ex-boyfriend, Aaron's, name then a huge X. She'd pined for him for five years, accepting his excuses of flying around the world for work while he just went across town to his wife. She'd left town a year ago to get away from two heartbreaks: papa's death and Aaron's unavailability, only for him to call out of the blue when she just so happened to be in town. She blamed Jonny for that one. He'd always wanted a big brother and idolized Aaron.

What a waste of five years.

"I probably shouldn't have come back to Miami," she said into the phone pressed to her ear, wishing she could talk to him without the butterflies in her stomach. "I should've just sold all Dad's things after he died."

"I wish you'd told me he died when you left last year. But I'm glad you're back," was the smooth reply.

"Sorry to hear about your split," she managed. "She was a nice lady."

"Thanks. It's been a bit rough lately for both of us. I could use a friend. I'm sure you could, too."

Not falling for it this time, she vowed to herself. At her silence, he continued.

"If you have time while you're in town, we could get together for coffee or something."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said.

"Might as well. You're too sweet to get over me," he teased.

"Just because I dropped at your feet whenever you called for five years doesn't mean I'll do it now. It's been a year since I found out you were married and we split!"

"Hey, I really am free this time. Got the divorce paperwork to prove it."

A part of her still longed for him, to smell him and feel his skin against hers. She'd fallen for him the day she met him seven years ago. He was her world, but she'd been nothing more than an afterthought, strung along with promises for years. Now, he could deliver what he'd always promised: a life together, yet she didn't feel like leaping for joy like she would've a year ago.

"I'll even bring the paperwork with me," he offered. "Lunch, nothing else. If we still click, we'll go from there."

She chewed her lip. By the confidence in his voice, he expected her not only to agree, but to resume her place on his arm.

"Lunch," she agreed slowly.

"Great! How about a week from Sunday? I'll send you an email of where and when."

"Fine." She hung up, sick of him and her weakness. She'd sworn off men - especially this one - a year ago! Of all the Jonny's childhood injuries she'd healed, she couldn't fix her own heart!

Uncurling from the couch, she started to the bedroom of her father's small Miami apartment. Jonny stayed after their father's death, while she moved closer to her mom on the west coast. He hadn't changed a thing, as if expecting papa to come home at any minute. Saddened, she considered calling him to check in when a sudden pounding at the door made her jump.

Aaron! Her heart soared. She clawed her way into a sweatshirt as she hurried to the door. The pounding didn't stop until she wrenched it open.

"Kyle?" she asked, looking up at the freaky-looking youth in Goth clothing and multiple facial piercings. He pushed his way into the small apartment and flung the unusual Miami rain from his clothes. "Jonny's not here."

The pale, dark haired youth was drenched, but it was the wild look on his face that made her stop in the middle of the foyer and watch him pace with agitated energy.

"You ok?"

"I don't know," he said at last and flung himself into a chair, planting his hands against his forehead. "I feel funny, like really cold."

She was used to the teenage fits of temperament after spending the summer with her newly turned 20 year old brother. She tied her hair back and straightened the sweatshirt, somewhat relieved and disappointed it hadn't been Aaron at the door after all.

"You want some cocoa?"

"B, I did something wicked wrong!" Kyle said, following her into the kitchen. "I have to tell you about Jonny."

"He's visiting our grandparents. He'll be back next weekend," she said. "You wanna call him or something?"

"No, B, he's ..." Kyle met her gaze, flushing.

"Are you hurt?" she asked and leaned against the counter. There was blood on his trench coat. It mixed with the rain to drip pink puddles on her ceramic floor.

"Jonny didn't go to your grandparents!" Kyle blurted out. "He was seeing this girl, and he told you he was going to go so you didn't think he'd spent the night with her and ... you know ..."

"Jonny's not in Indiana?"

"He's in trouble, B, and it's all my fault!"

"In trouble *how*?" she demanded.

"His girlfriend is so hot but she's like a vampire," Kyle said and ran his hands through his wet hair again.

"Vampire?"

“He went to see her yesterday, and he asked me to stop by and meet all her friends tonight. I went. Fuck ... I mean, shoot, B, it was terrible. They really are vampires! They were killing people in front of me, and his girlfriend bit him, and now he’s going to be a vampire. They said -

“Kyle, are you on drugs?” she asked, baffled.

“No, B, I promise. I’ve been clean as long as Jonny.”

“Jonny’s on drugs?”

“Not anymore. I didn’t want to come here but I know about ... he told me - and I never told anyone I swear it - about your healing ability.” His voice turned to a whisper and he looked at her, conflicted. He’d been Jonny’s best friend for ten years, and they’d started the Goth-vampire stage when they got to college. She never thought much of their black clad, piercing decorated vampire girlfriends but couldn’t help being irked that Jonny had told his friend *her* biggest secret!

“What’re you telling me, that Jonny’s hurt?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“You think he’s been eaten by a vampire.”

“Not *eaten*, B,” Kyle corrected her. “Just bit his ... actually, it was his arm, right here. She bit him there.”

“Kyle, you’re scaring me. But, whatever. We’ll talk about the drugs later. I’m going to get him.”

“I’m not going back there,” he said resolutely.

“You’ve been inseparable for ten years,” she said. She studied him, alarm swirling through her for the first time. “What gives?”

“I don’t know, Bianca,” he whispered. “You shouldn’t go either. We should just call the police. They can go. We’ll stay here. You’ll be safe.”

“Show me where this party is,” she told him. She’d never seen him so upset in all the years she’d known him! She retreated to her bedroom to grab her purse. “You sure you’re not hurt?”

He gripped his forearm in the same spot he’d told her Jonny had been bitten but shook his head. More blood trickled onto her tile. She frowned, uncertain what to think of his story. She planted her hand on his forehead, coolness flowing through her. His arm was wounded, and something akin to poison ran in his blood. She couldn’t quite understand what the poison was; it wasn’t a normal infection, and yet it couldn’t be anything else.

“You were hurt,” she murmured, pitying her brother’s friend. “And if you tell anyone I can do that, you’ll be in big trouble.”

“I feel strange,” Kyle murmured, trailing her out of the door.

“How far is this party?” she asked. “Oh, wait, don’t shut the - “ The door to the apartment clicked shut, locking automatically. “I forgot my keys. You have a car?”

He nodded and led them into the rainy night. His ancient, rusted Camaro was illegally parked in front of the building. She almost scolded him before stopping herself. The kid was already too upset about something. His body assured her he wasn’t on drugs when she’d healed him, and she couldn’t grasp that any normal party would upset the usually jovial young man.

She cleared off the passenger sides eat and pushed fast food trash from the passenger seat. Sitting, she gave up on the jammed seatbelt after a few useless tugs.

“B, how do you do it?” Kyle asked.

“Do what?”

“The healing thing.”

She rolled her eyes, irritated that her brother hadn’t taken his promise to her seriously. Of course, if he was on drugs and running around with a vampire chic at parties instead of going to Indiana like he was supposed to, she shouldn’t be surprised he’d spilled the beans.

“I don’t know. It’s just something I do,” she replied.

“Have you ever told anyone? Like a doctor or scientist or something?”

"It's not your normal conversation starter," she said with a small laugh. "Hi, I'm Bianca, I have magic voodoo healing powers."

He smiled, and she gazed at him, wondering when he and her brother had grown from youths into handsome young men. His features were no longer soft and his body had filled out. She was so used to her brother that she didn't notice him grow up, but she saw it in Kyle. Just as she saw the adult in him, she saw his tension. His knuckles were white as he clenched the steering wheel, and his tall form hunched forward.

Her unease grew as they reached a seedy neighborhood outside of Little Havana. It wasn't somewhere she'd ever venture, even in daylight. There were thugs in the streets, bars on the windows of sagging houses, and cars on blocks.

He continued through the streets and slowed when he reached a dilapidated, boarded up church on a corner. Light strobed through cracks in the boards, and the sidewalks teemed with shady looking characters dressed all in black.

She heard the blaring trance music before she opened the car door and smelled the unmistakable scent of marijuana mixed with incense and body odor.

"Stay here, Kyle," she said, looking uncertainly at the intimidating scene before her. "I'll go get him. Do you know where he is exactly?"

He shook his head and squeezed the steering wheel until one of his fingers popped.

"Here's my phone. If I'm not back in twenty minutes, go someplace safe and call the police, ok?" she said, placing it on the dashboard. "And I'm leaving my purse."

"You'll lose it if you don't," he said wisely, accustomed to helping Jonny help her search the house for keys, purses, and anything else she lost.

"Yep," she agreed. "Wish me luck!"

"Wait!"

"What's up, kid?"

"Nothing." He looked at once panicked and guilty. He hesitated, then shook his head.

She gave his teenage temper the benefit of the doubt and patted him on the shoulder as she left the car. Her heart quickening, she started towards the entrance of the church. Several of the men in black eyed her.

The interior of the church was packed with bodies writhing to the deafening, throbbing music. At under five and a half feet, she wasn't sure how she was supposed to find her brother among the people around her.

Most of them were men. She didn't notice until she'd jostled her way into the center of the church. *All* of them wore eerie red contact lenses. A shiver of alarm went through her, but she gritted her teeth and pressed on, hoping to find her brother fast. The church was hot and loud, the scents that overwhelmed her outside stifling. She found a chair jammed against the wall and stepped on it to see the crowd.

She didn't see her brother's bleached hair and familiar face anywhere in the crowd. She hopped down, oblivious to the attention channeled her way by the red-eyed men around her. Light spilled across the church as a door leading to the chambers in the rear opened.

She made her way to the hallway and breathed more easily in the less crowded space. Men and women lined the halls, most making out. Several of the rooms on either side were open, revealing couples in various stages of undress, a room with junkies shooting up and potheads lighting up, and a room filled with what looked like people sleeping.

She reached the exit at the end of the hall and stopped, puzzled. Jonny hadn't been there at all. She faced a shorter hallway leading into what may have been a kitchen at one time. A lot could've happened to him between the time Kyle left Jonny there and returned with her. Worried, she crossed her arms and climbed the stairs to the kitchen area. She froze, Kyle's words about vampires returning to her.

A naked, unconscious woman lay atop the island in the center with five of the men with red eyes chewing on various parts of her body, one on each leg, one on each arm, and one at her neck. Bianca backed away, heart racing.

"What's this?" The man who spoke snatched her arms from behind and shoved her into the kitchen. She looked away from the scene, unwilling to believe what she saw was real.

"That's B," Jonny answered from somewhere inside the kitchen.

"What's a B?" someone else snickered.

One of the men drinking blood from the naked woman straightened, and she gasped.

"Jonny!"

"Hi B," he said, eyes glazed and blood running down his chin to his white polo.

"Jonny, what are you doing here?" she demanded, pulling away from the man behind her.

"It's his initiation day," the man said.

She faced the speaker and took a step back. He was large and thick with glowing eyes and teeth sharpened into fangs.

"Talon, this is B," Jonny said in a breathless voice.

"A pleasure, B."

She took a step back, overwhelmed by the scene before her. She stared at her brother, who seemed unaware of where he was or what he did. Talon looked her up and down in a way that made her skin crawl before he took her arm. He sliced her forearm, watching in satisfaction as it healed before his eyes.

She wrenched away.

"The kid wasn't lying," he said. "You and me, babe. This could be fun."

She turned to run, panic flying through her at the feral look he gave her. He snatched her and half carried, half dragged her through the kitchen's opposite door. She struggled, but he wrapped his arms around her in a hold she couldn't break.

"Jonny!" she shouted.

"Do what I say, bitch, and I might not kill him!" the man named Talon snarled.

"The police are on their way! They'll be -" she cried.

"Shut the fuck up!"

He shoved open a door to the dark night and carried her to an awaiting car. She planted her legs against the frame of the car.

"Jonny!" she screamed.

Fiery pain tore through her as he stabbed her in the neck.

Damian's Assassin is available from:

Amazon: <http://amzn.to/rEDD3H>

Barnes and Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/damians-assassin-lizzy-ford/1030176868>

iTunes: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/book/damians-assassin/id425343219?mt=11>

Smashwords: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/43024>